

Let's Learn About Hmong New Year

Meet Kia Lee

Learn about Hmong New Year from Kia Lee. Kia was born in Laos and in the late 1970s, Kia arrived in the United States with her family. Growing up, Kia celebrated this important holiday alongside her family and community members. Learn the many different **traditions** that Kia recognizes as an important aspect of celebrating not only Hmong New Year, but also the history and culture for future generations of Hmong Americans.

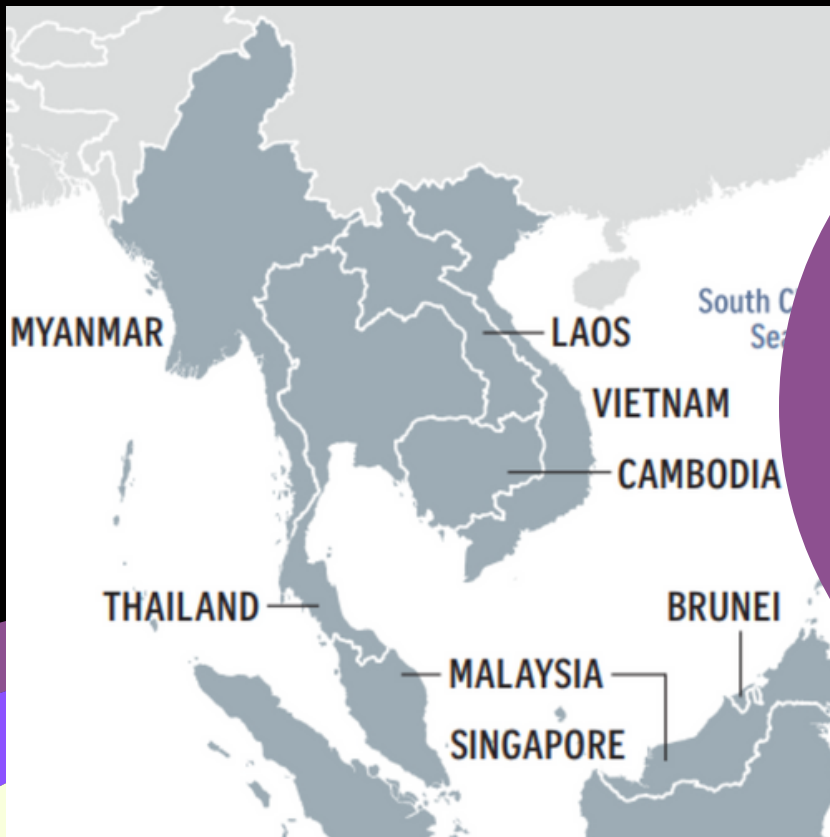
Kia was born in Laos to a **Lao** father and **Hmong** mother. In 1979, Kia, along with her family, including her four brothers and sisters, arrived in the US. Unlike many other **immigrant** and **refugee** communities, the Hmong people do not have one specific nation that they had all come from. The Hmong are an **ethnic group**, with a shared language, culture and traditions that have spanned from Southern China, to the mountains of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.



The Hmong community itself is made up of a small number of families or **clans** that stand as the smaller parts to make up the whole Hmong community. As a result, many Hmong, and especially Hmong American traditions can vary in length and ways of celebrating.

For example, Kia mentions that Hmong New Year itself is a celebration that typically happens over the course of one week. Other members of the community, however, note that their own celebrations can range anywhere from a couple of days all the way to two weeks, depending on where they are celebrating and who they are celebrating with.

While Hmong New Year is usually celebrated on December 30th, Kia notes that just like how the length of celebrations can vary from clan to clan and is often dependent on where they are celebrating, when the holiday is celebrated can change, too. **“Though [we] try to celebrate the holiday as close to December 30th as possible, the weather in different states in the US doesn’t permit for the typically outdoor celebration.”** Because many people in the community prefer to celebrate the holiday and the season outdoors, many communities chose to celebrate on the days in the winter that have the mildest weather.



Take a look at this map of Southeast Asia. Notice where Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China sit.

While the length and timing of celebrations may not always be the same for all of the Hmong Americans around the country, Kia says that the first three days of the celebration can be especially important. These first few days carry a few extra traditions that many observe as a way to ensure a successful year to come. Among these, Kia mentions avoiding spilling water to avoid rain in the upcoming year. Additionally, people try not to spend money, as spending it during these three days means that they will not be able to save any money in the new year.

Reflection Time!

Let's take a moment to make connections from your own experiences to Kia's story. Write down your thoughts after reading

1. Are there any special traditions in your family that have been celebrated for a long time? How does your family celebrate?

2. Ask your family if how you all celebrate has changed from now and from the past.

3. As you think about your special holiday, when does it happen? Is it connected to a season? Hmong New Year is connected to the end of harvest season.

Embracing Traditions

For many Hmong and Hmong American communities, the new year is a time not only for joyful celebrations and spending time with the community but also a chance to rest. Many in the community use the new year as an opportunity to relax and reflect back on their hard work for the year. For younger community members, it is also a chance to connect with other kids and get to reunite with many community members. For Kia, seeing young Hmong Americans connect and celebrate together is important. She believes that Hmong Americans "**have an incredible history that needs to be passed down to the next generation.**"

For Kia and her family, New Year's is a time for renewal, and it's reflected in the many different ways they celebrate, from the clothes they wear to the food they eat. Many Hmong Americans wear special clothes for the New Year that celebrate the history of **embroidery** and **weaving** within Hmong culture. These clothes use bright colors and unique patterns and motifs that can have special meanings or stories behind them. In addition to the detailed weaving, many of the clothes also hang coins from thin strings.

In the past in Laos, Kia notes that moms would often handmade new clothes for their families and children. These clothes could take an entire year of weaving and embroidering so that they could be ready just in time for New Year's. In more recent years, Hmong Americans often don't have the time and materials needed to handmade their own clothes, so many families will order them directly from Laos. Kia mentions, however, that many communities still try to make or embroider their own clothes if they can.



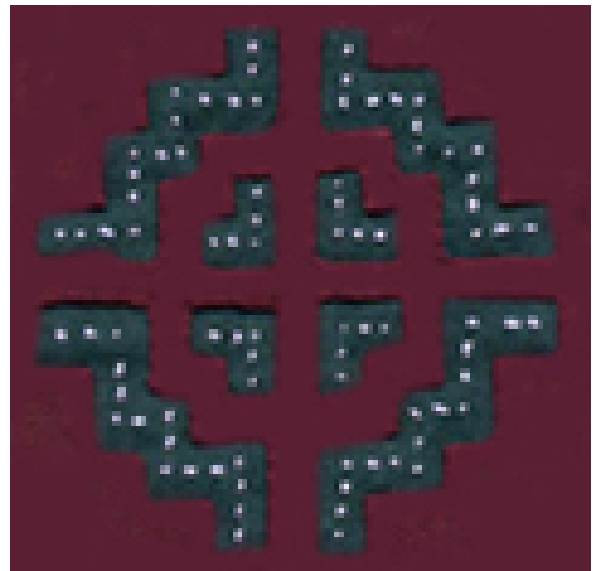
Woven Stories

Notice, in the photo above, how many different patterns you can find in the clothes. Take note of all of the unique shapes and lines you see. Even the green sash has its own patterning as well. Each of these shapes and designs helps give added meaning to the clothes, and sometimes, even helps tell a story through the clothes themselves.

Try it yourself! Try drawing the motifs found below. Imagine how you would use thread and embroidering to create these designs in cloth.



Elephant's Foot



House/Home

Food is another important part of how Kia, her family, and her community celebrate the holiday. During Hmong New Year, rice and meats, especially chicken, are often eaten. Kia says that many families will often save their best or most special meals and recipes for New Year's. Kia notes that while some of the meals may seem plain, there is always much of it to go around. One of the reasons that rice and meat are such staples of the holiday is, in part, because of another of the many traditions and beliefs tied to the first three days of Hmong New Year celebrations. Specifically, avoiding vegetables during the new year. It is said that if you eat vegetables during those first few days of celebrations, you will eat vegetables, and only vegetables, for the rest of the year.



Reflection

How does a Holiday taste?

Food is an important part of how Kia celebrates New Year's. For many families and communities around the world, food becomes a focus for traditions and celebrations. Take a moment to think about how you celebrate your favorite holiday. What kinds of foods do you eat? How do they smell? Do you eat those foods during any other time of the year? If so, when else do you eat them?

Poached Chicken (Nqaj Qab Vum)

Ingredients

For chicken

- 1 whole clean brown hen or rooster
- 4 quarts (a gallon) of water (or enough water to cover the chicken)
- 2-3 tbsp salt
- 1 lemongrass stalk
- Salt and pepper to season at the end

For shallot and pepper paste

- 4-6 shallots cut
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 Thai chili pepper (add more if needed)
- 1 tsp salt
- 4 green onions cut into 4 inch pieces
- 1 cup chopped cilantro
- 2 tsp fish sauce

Steps

1. In a pot, add in the water and salt. While you're waiting for the water to boil, clean the chicken well and poke a few holes in between the thigh area of the chicken as well as the joint of wing to the chicken breast area. This will insure the chicken is cooked all the way though. Once the water comes to a boil, add in the chicken and lemongrass stalk. (There should be enough water to cover most of the chicken. Add more if needed). Cover with a lid and let it cook for a good 15 minutes or so. After 15 minutes, flip it over and cook for another 15-20 more minutes or until the chicken is cooked. Once cooked, take it out onto a bowl and let it cool for 10 minutes or so before cutting.
2. Cut the chicken into desire size pieces and season with salt and pepper to your liking.
3. SOUP: Save the chicken broth and add in some cubed tofu and medicinal herbs if desire. You can add celery stalks also if you want to. Feel free to add some mushroom seasoning for more umami flavor. Don't waste the delicious broth! You can use it to cook your rice as well.

Shallot Pepper Paste

1. In a roasting pan, add in the chopped shallots, green onion, garlic cloves, and chili pepper. Roast in the oven on broil 500' for a good 5-10 minutes each side until they are cooked and charred.
2. In a mortar n pestle, add in the roasted chili, garlic cloves, and salt. Pound until they break apart. Then add in the roasted shallots and green onions. Pound. Then add in the chopped cilantro and fish sauce. Pound and taste for seasoning. Add 2-3 spoons of this to the chopped poached chicken and enjoy!

You can try using this pepper paste as a side dip, too!

Connecting with Community

For Kia, Hmong New Year is mainly a time for the community to connect. More specifically, Kia mentions youth community members being able to connect and make friends through the different games and traditions that have become a large part of Hmong New Year. For example, one of the most popular games to play is **pov pob**. In a game of pov pob, young community members stand in two lines, usually one of young women and one of young men, and toss a small soft ball back and forth. For each time someone drops the ball, they must give an accessory that they are wearing to their throwing partner. The game is meant to be a chance for young people in the community to break the ice and get to know each other.

In addition to pov pob, Kia mentions a popular game to play is **tuj lub** (too-loo). Tuj lub is a game where teams of people spin tops, in the hopes of getting the other teams' tops out. While it is often played during the new year, it can be played all year long.

Reflection

New Year's Fun

For Kia and other Hmong Americans, games are an important part of how they celebrate the New Year. Take a moment to think about your favorite holiday. Are there any games you play? Do you only play it during that holiday or do you play it throughout the year?



A young woman plays pov pob at a Hmong New Year celebration in Wisconsin



New Meanings, Old Traditions

For Kia, Hmong New Year might not necessarily be a religious holiday, but, it is instead a chance for all of the different Hmong Americans, regardless of clan or religious background to connect and come together as one. Many Hmong Americans follow different religions or have different spiritual practices depending on their clan background and where their ancestors may be from. For example, many of the clans and communities of Hmong Americans who came to the US from Laos have community members who practice the Catholic faith, while others may still follow more traditional Hmong religions.

While having this variety of spiritual backgrounds within the community is not always the easiest, Kia says that there are ways for the community to continue to connect despite their differences. For Kia, she believes that many Hmong Americans can relate to one another thanks to their shared cultural traditions, which Kia believes the Hmong American community is especially dedicated to maintaining. “[Hmong Americans] say that they do not feel the need to change, because God has meant for [them] to be that way, so that’s the way they choose to live.”

Kia believes their dedication to traditions is good, as it can be an important part of sharing information from one generation to the next. In particular, Kia hopes the history and culture of the Hmong American community will not be lost to the next generation. “Children cannot forget who they are.” She hopes that the next generation will embrace their traditions, language, and history so that it will not fade away as the community continues to change.

Reflection

Festivals and Fairs

Hmong New Year celebrations are festivals full of performers, dancers, and artists. Take a look at [this video of the Fresno Hmong New Year Celebration](#) and see how many people come to celebrate in different ways. Are there any festivals you attend to celebrate holidays? If so, what kinds of things do you see at the festivals? Do you get to hear any kinds of music or watch any dances?

Vocabulary

- **TRADITIONS:** Beliefs and behaviors (like holidays) that are passed down from one generation to the next. The word Tradition is from the Latin word "to hand over, or transmit". Traditions can include holidays, important items like specific clothing, music, foods, and practices.
- **LAO:** The community from the country of Laos. This term is more favored over "Laotian" to describe the people and culture of Laos as "Laotian" is a colonial french term.
- **HMONG:** A community of people whose ancestors originated from central China. Today, most Hmong communities live in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Southern China, and the United States.
- **IMMIGRANT:** Someone who moves from one country to another, usually for many different reasons, including work or school. While immigrants cannot always control the reasons they are pushed from one country or pulled to another, they are different from refugees.
- **REFUGEES:** A community of folks who are forced to leave their homes because of safety--this could be because of war, being a part of a prosecuted group, because of natural disasters, etc. For many refugees, there is no choice because to stay in the homeland is dangerous for oneself or one's family.
- **EMBROIDERY:** The art of decorating fabric with stitching techniques to produce a pattern or image.
- **WEAVING:** a way of making clothes by lacing thread or yarn together.
- **POV POB:** A ball-tossing game often played by kids at Hmong New Year
- **TUJ LUB:** A game played at Hmong New Year in which spinning tops are used to compete against each other and knock each other out of the ring.