

Let's Learn About Khmer New Year

Meet Stella and Chan

Learn about Khmer and Lao New Year from Stella and Chan Dy. Stella is three years old, growing up in Auburn Washington with her mother, Chan, and her family. Chan shares their family's blended **heritage** and **traditions** with her daughter each year through celebrations like Lao and Khmer New Year. Learn how Chan and Stella ring in **Lao** and **Khmer** New Year with delicious foods, family gatherings and trips to their **Buddhist Temple**.

Chan was born in Thailand to a Lao mother and a Khmer Father. Khmer folks are an ethnic community in Cambodia and make up a large percentage of the population of Cambodia. Her family had to escape Laos for safety as **refugees** and left for their safety to Thailand. Her family moved to the US and Washington state when she was five years old and has created a home here in the US with her family and within her community.



Chan shares how her Lao and Khmer traditions are important to her and for her to share with Stella:

"For me, it's important because it is a way we can honor our ancestors, our cultures and just to remember where we came from. Even for me, even though I was born in Thailand, there is only so much that I can remember as a kid but as I get older--we start to remember more and we start to continue to do these traditions.

I know why it is so important to my parents. And I want that to continue for my child, going forward. I want her to remember where her mother came from and where her grandmother had came from, just so that she knows what is a part of her."

For Chan, the holiday is one way to connect Stella to her and her parents' homeland. Memories old and new memories made here in the United States are tied together in their traditions. That connection is cherished and important. As new memories are made, some parts of their holiday have changed as the family grows in Washington. Stella's father is Khmer American and how they celebrate New Year is a mixture of Lao and Khmer holidays.

Chan explains that Khmer and Lao New Year have many things in common, "In Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, the New Year all falls on the same date. We celebrate very similarly from what I know of--we go to the temples, we do the prayers, and we do the offerings, and kind of similar foods as well. It is interesting to see".



Take a look at this map of Southeast Asia. Find Cambodia and notice how its neighbors are Laos and Thailand.

Lao, Khmer and Thai New Year lands on the second week of April and is celebrated during the weekend of the 14th. The exact date may shift around as the holiday is celebrated with weekend-long festivities. But the tradition is long-loved and goes back generations. Khmer and Lao New Year, "[are] connected to the end of the harvest season for the farmers. A celebration for the end of the harvest year. For a lot of the farmers, they don't get a lot of time off and its one of the times they rarely get some time just to relax. That's what my parents have told me because they were farmers when they lived in Laos so they worked in the rice fields and so did my older sisters."

Reflection Time!

Let's take a moment to make connections from your own experiences to Stella and Chan'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? Khmer New Year is connected to the rice harvest.

Making New Year Memories at Home

For Chan and Stella's family, Lao and Khmer New Year begins at home with cleaning and preparing the house for a fresh start for the rest of the year. After making the house spic-and-span, the family gathers together around their family shrine.

"We do an offering where we put food and drinks [around the shrine], we light incense and we do a little prayer. That is how we start off our New Years. The food offering and the cleaning of the house is basically to welcome in the new protector god for the year. So we want to welcome them the best that we can, with a clean home and with food so that way they can continue to protect us for the new year to keep us and our families healthy".

She describes that the family shrine has a small statue of the Buddha and is always put in a special place in the home. After offering fruits and other items around the shrine, the family lights **incense** together and says a small prayer together. Coming together and celebrating another year, wishes for health are shared.

Storytime

A Story of Three Questions

The story of Khmer New Year begins with a high-stakes bet. Kabal Mahar Prum, a heavenly wise man, and father to seven daughters wanted to challenge a young monk. Kabal Mahar Prum bets the young man that he would not be able to answer three questions, "Where do the morning, afternoon, and evening blessings take place?". whoever was the winner would keep their head and take the others!

The young man had no luck finding the answer out himself and was about to give up as he overheard two eagles talking about him as their next meal. As the eagles chat they reveal the answers to the questions. The morning blessing is when folks wash their face, the afternoon as they wash their body and the evening blessing as they wash their face. The young monk is saved!

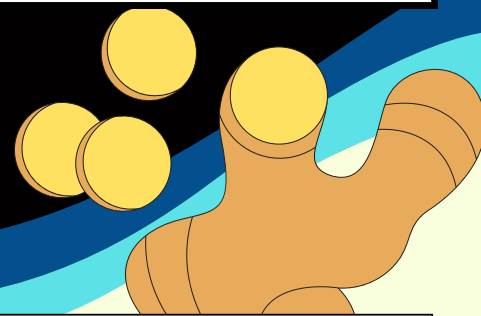
With the correct answers revealed, Kabal Mahar Prum presents his head with some warnings, if his head should touch the earth directly--it would lead to its destruction. One of his seven daughters brings down their father's head each year and in turn, they protect the Khmer people.

Story adapted from [this](#) South Seattle Emerald article



One part of the day is distinctly Lao, “for my family, I will visit my mom and when my grandmother was alive we’d all go and visit her house. She would make these fibers, that we’d tie around each other’s wrists as a blessing for the new year. That’s something that we do specifically as Laos that we tie a white string around each other’s wrists and saying our prayers and hopes for them for the New Years, what we hope that they accomplish, and hopefully they have good health”

The white fiber bracelet holds all of the wonderful wishes for each member of the family. The visible symbol of a family member’s love and caring is wrapped around each wrist. This tradition of **baci (Lao)** is a special reminder of one’s family and this special moment of celebrating a New Year.



As the Holiday begins, so too does the preparation of a feast of special foods. Chan’s family kitchen is busy with the savory smells of green papaya being pounded. Stella and Chan have a busy weekend as they also get to taste the flavors from their Khmer side of the family.

“Our staple feasts are like rice, like sticky rice and my mom makes papaya salad and fried chicken for New Years. And for my husband’s family his mom usually will make beef sticks, Cambodian beef sticks, and pickled vegetables which includes carrots and cucumbers, and occasionally she’ll do like stuffed chicken wings-which is really good. Those are the things that we look forward to”.

Chan shares about her mother-in-law's beef sticks or **Sach Ko Jakak (Khmer)**. Barbequed and on skewers, the meat is basted in a delicious combination of sweet palm sugar and the savory flavors of fish sauce blended with lemongrass, galangal (a cousin to ginger), shallot, garlic, and turmeric. The beef sticks are paired with the tart flavors of the pickled veggies or **Jaruh (Khmer)**, made from cucumbers, carrots, and cabbage pickled in vinegar.

Beef Stick Recipe: Sach Koh Jarak

- 1 whole steak - approx 1 lb (Ribeye, NY strip, sirloin)
- 1/2 tsp turmeric powder
- 2 stalks lemongrass
- 1 tbsp galangal
- 2 Thai chilis
- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 tbsp sugar
- 2 tsp chicken bouillon
- 2 tbsp oyster sauce
- 1 tbsp fish sauce
- 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil

1. Prepare the kroueng by slicing lemongrass and galangal, peeling garlic, and setting aside the chili and lime leaves.
2. In a mortar and pestle, pound lemongrass, galangal, lime leaves, and garlic until finely grounded.
3. Add the chili and turmeric powder and continue to beat the mixture.
4. Prepare your steak by cutting it into thin strips, you'll want even strips so the beef will cook evenly.
5. In a large bowl, add the beef as well as fish sauce, chicken bouillon powder, oyster sauce, brown sugar, vegetable oil, and black pepper.
6. Add the kroueng mixture and mix until evenly coated.
7. Marinate beef for at least 1 hour in the fridge. In the meantime, soak the skewer sticks in water.
8. Take the soaked skewer sticks and skew the marinated beef, leaving some room at the bottom for holding.
9. Once all the skewers are prepared, heat up the grill to medium heat and place the skewers onto the grill top.
10. Grill beef for about 10 mins or until slightly charred on the edges.

Recipe adapted from madewithsabrina.com

As her family gathers together, happy memories of eating time-honored flavors are remembered. Chan recalls a very special dish prepared by a loved relative.

"I know that when I was growing up my grandmother used to make this dessert that was banana and it was wrapped in rice, and then they would steam it in banana leaf. And when I was growing up that was a staple piece that we would spend time making together, and it was one of those memories that I just hold close to me."

Making the banana sticky rice dessert or **Kow Tom (Lao)** with her grandmother is an activity that Chan cherished. While her grandmother is no longer around, her granddaughter plans to keep her memory alive through the dishes they made and shared with one another.

Celebrating in Community

Khmer and Lao New Year are celebrated over three days. One of the most important locations to visit during the holiday is the Buddhist Temple as the Khmer and Lao community come together for a Day of Charity, religious blessings and celebration. Chan and Stella get ready for their Temple visit by putting on traditional Cambodian clothing. Colorful skirts and blouses decorated in beautiful **embroidery** patterns are worn to their temple located in Kent, Washington—the Cambodian Buddhist Monk’s Association.

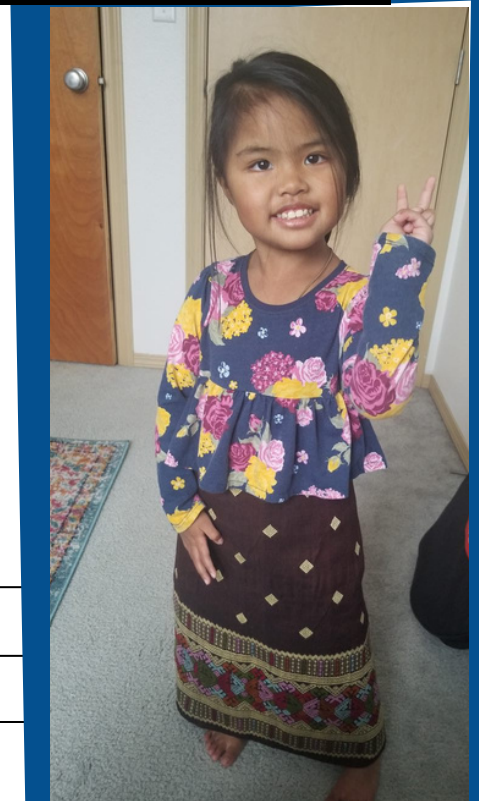
“Usually, we attend the temple together as a family. So we all get dressed up in our traditional Cambodian clothing. Which is usually, We’ll wear a blouse and a nice skirt, like a wrap skirt, it has a ton of patterns. They range in a bunch of different colors and it is very intricate. We have a collection of them from, actually when we first came here from Thailand, we’ve been collecting them for quite some time.”

Reflection

Threads that Connect Us

Stella is dressed in her burgundy wrap skirt decorated with golden embroidery designs. Special clothes for a special holiday--like her, many of the temple goers have important clothes that connect them to their heritage.

Do you have special clothes that you or your family wears for an important occasion? Are there any traditional clothes or items that you were that connect you to your family's heritage? How does it make your feel when you wear them?





Giving back to the community and to the Temple is a part of the celebration of New Years. Chan shares how the community comes together during this special time and often she sees familiar faces as families return back year after year.

"The second day of New Years is meant to donate. You either donate to charity or you could donate to your elderly. So you can donate to someone elderly in your family or just donate things so it's a day of doing something for someone else. But usually when we go to the Temple, we bring the food we prepare, usually my mom will bring sticky rice and papaya salad, a few various dishes like soup—chicken soup. We'll also bring offerings, that we want to bring to donate to the temple. Usually, those are snacks and toiletries. Usually, we bring water and bottled drinks, coffees and things like that. And we'll also donate some money because that's just part of the way we celebrate."

Colorful Reminders

Notice how, in the image of folks providing offerings at the temple, there are a lot of different colors on the different flags above the guests as well as on the table. The colorful flags in the sand on the table are a way to honor ancestors and family members who have passed away. The flags hanging above the temple-goers are of the Buddhist Flag. Each of the colors of the Buddhist Flag represents an important reminder to live your life in a positive way.



Blue	To be compassionate
Yellow	To be balanced
Red	Live with virtue, wisdom and dignity
White	To live purely
Orange	To learn from the Wisdom of the Buddha

Let's try out this idea ourselves! Think about how you'd like to live your life--it could be that you want to try hard at music practice or to have more empathy. Write down these qualities and reminders on one column on a piece of paper and on the other column think about a color that could represent that idea.

Grab another piece of paper and either grab construction paper or materials to color with like markers or crayons. Decorate your piece of blank paper with those colors. After your flag is finished, place the flag in your room or in a space that you can see easily. The next time you pass on by the flag, it will be a reminder of who you want yourself to be and hope that it will encourage you to continue to work to become that person.

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Stella, Chan and her family practice charity and compassion to your community, to your elders and for the greater good to celebrate the New Year. The Temple becomes a place to come back to and to provide for and in exchange the families are blessed for a good start to their upcoming year.

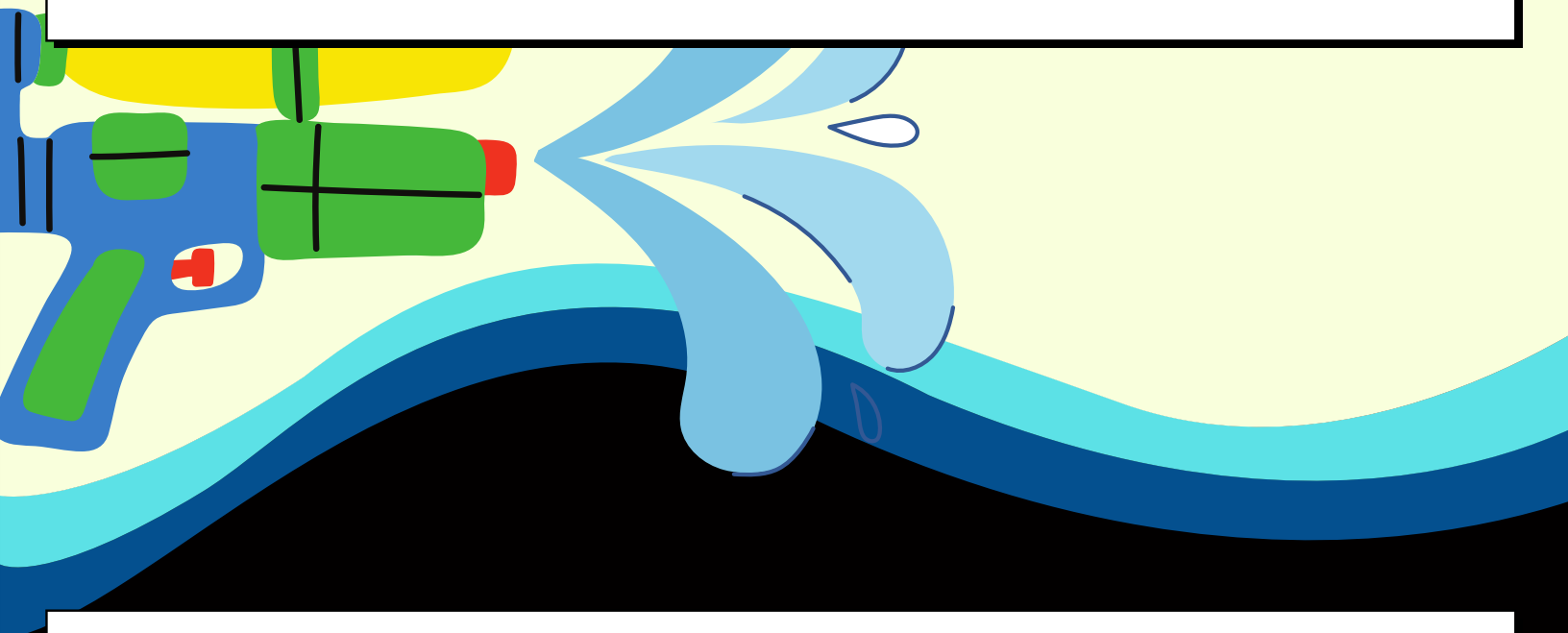
“We spend most of our morning at the temple and we’ll have lunch there. Most of the people who attend the temple that morning to do the prayers and receive blessings will also share lunches together, so everybody brings a lunch they’ve prepared. We’ll spend lunch together, we’ll have a meal together with our families, the community with everybody who attends the temple. And that’s pretty much the been the way that we’ve been celebrating since I was a kid.”

Chan has family in different states and places all-around the United States. As she remembers visiting family for New Years, she shares that the activities at the Temple are catered to each community. Sometimes at the temple, folks will host traditional games, folk dancing and singing popular karaoke songs.

Reflection

Singing karaoke and the folk songs that are belted out both make memories and connect to past ones. Even though time and places where we live might separate us, sometimes songs remind us of loved ones. Listen to some Khmer Karaoke music as you think about what your karaoke song would be. Does it remind you of a special memory?

Growing up in Washington, the chilly weather puts a damper on one of the much-loved parts of the holiday—water fights! But at her family members' temple in Louisiana, the hot weather is perfect for soaking each other with water guns! The tradition of water-fights is both a fun activity and also is thought to cleanse away any bad luck or energies from the last year.



Chan and Stella celebrate Khmer New Year in community at their family's temple as well as at home as a family. Her family blends together traditions that are both similar and sometimes a little different—but every tradition element is as important and authentic to their family. Their tradition of New Year is a celebration of who the family is, was, and continues to be. As Chan reflects on the importance of the Khmer New Year, she says:

I think that for me, continuing to learn and keep our traditions alive. I think that sometimes being an Asian American you struggle sometimes with identifying [who] you are and I think that if we keep our traditions and keep our stories alive, and where our parents have come from and where our families have come from I think that we can honor where we are and where we are going with our future. It is important to share these stories. I think that, being born in America, we tend to forget that its not just a one path that we have so much and so many stories and that its such a melting pot of who we are , and our different stories I think it is important for us to remember that.

Vocabulary

- **HERITAGE:** The unique values, practices, culture, and objects that are passed down through our families to us. Our heritage can be influenced by where our families grew up, their histories, and their backgrounds.
- **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.
- **KHMER:** The largest ethnicity and community in the country of Cambodia.
- **BUDDHIST:** A religion that follows the teachings of the Buddha. There are religious holidays that honor his life and the principles he put forth. Buddhists focus on doing good deeds and practicing compassion.
- **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.
- **INCENSE:** An object that is used in many religious and cultural celebrations and ceremonies. Incense is a combination of essential oils made into a paste that is dried either onto sticks or molded into different shapes. When burned, incense release a strong smell of the essential oils through a cloud of heavy smoke.
- **BACI:** The Lao tradition of bracelet tying and blessings. An elder or religious leader is usually the one to tie the string onto a younger member of the family and they exchange good wishes to one another.
- **EMBROIDERY:** The art of decorating fabric with stitching techniques to produce a pattern or image.