

# Let's Learn About Lao New Year

## Meet Jintana

Learn about Lao New Year from Jintana Lityouvong. Jintana is a second-generation **Lao American** who grew up in Seattle's Rainier Beach neighborhood. Today, she continues to live and celebrate in the Seattle area. Learn how Jintana has adapted Lao New Year traditions to fit her life in the Pacific Northwest while maintaining the spirit, meanings, and even the yummy treats that have defined the holiday for herself and her family.

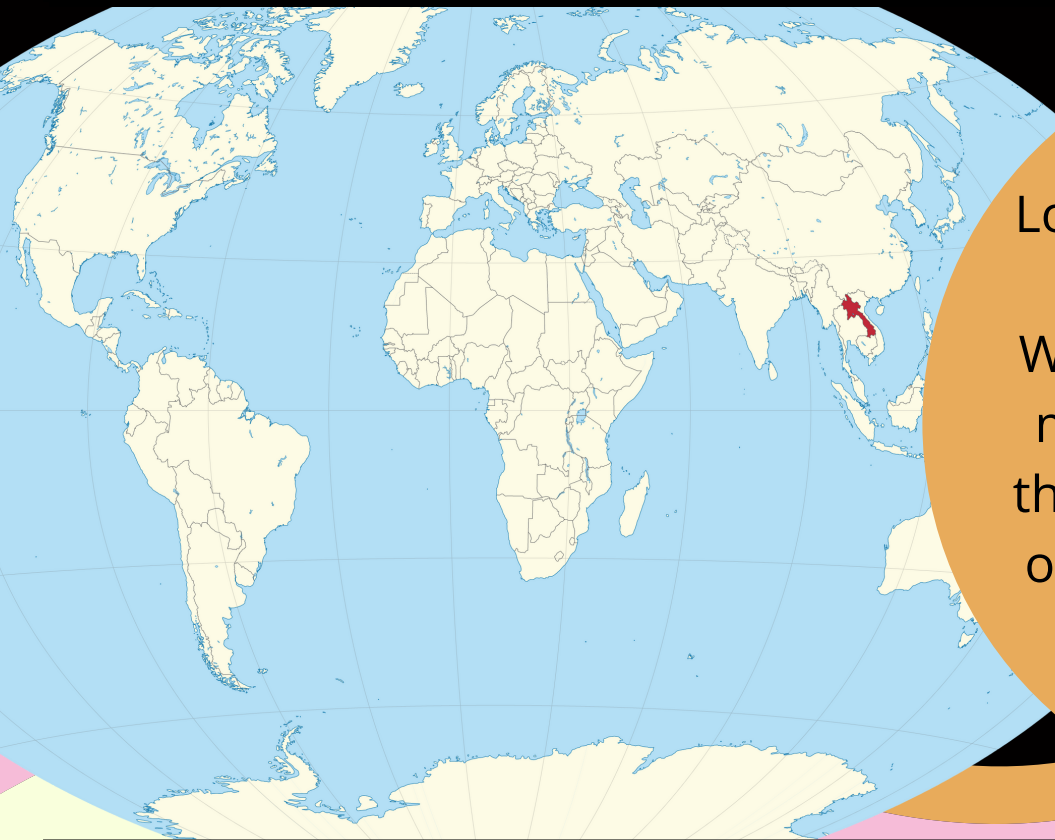
Jintana's parents were born and raised in **Laos**. In the 1980s, they came to the United States as **refugees**. Once in the Pacific Northwest, Jintana's family found that **"it's a little hard to transfer the exact same traditions and activities from Laos to here."** In spite of this, Jintana and her family have found ways to celebrate the holiday while here in Seattle, even in the face of challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.



**"When my brothers and I were young, my parents used to take us to the Laos temple nearby. Now that we're all adults, my parents still make sure to visit the temple for a day or two and invite us, but never want to force us. What is most important to them is us just visiting them at home (their house) and taking part in the traditions. During the pandemic, my parents didn't want me coming over and instead told me what to do in my own home while FaceTiming me."**

For Jintana, the holiday helps her feel connected to her family and community. In particular, she feels that celebrating the new year and participating in **traditions** is a way to honor and respect the work of her parents. For many families, choosing to **assimilate** and adopt American cultural traditions can be a difficult and painful process, especially if it means the possibility that they may lose their traditions from home. As a result, Jintana celebrates Lao New Year not only for herself, but to ensure her parents' work is recognized.

"[My parents] learned how to celebrate other holidays here like Halloween and Christmas so that my brothers and I were able to fit into American culture, so I think it's important that I learn about a holiday that was always so significant to them."



Look at Laos (highlighted in red) and find Washington State on the map. How do you think the weather and seasons of Laos and Washington might be different?

Jintana also views the holiday as an opportunity to connect with Laos and her **ancestry**, even if she can't always be there to celebrate in person. She thinks of many of the traditions as "a way to stay connected to my parents, my ancestors, their homeland."

She understands that many of the foods, traditions, and stories that she grew up with were the product of different generations sharing and accepting culture, and hopes that by continuing to celebrate Lao New Year, she can also share the holiday and the traditions that help make it special with future generations. "The traditions they have, the food they cook, and the stories they tell were all passed on to them, and I don't want it to just stop with me!"

## Reflection Time!

Let's take a moment to make connections between your own experiences to Jintana'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?

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

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

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# Celebrating with Family

Lao New Year is celebrated over three days in April. While the holiday technically falls on the 13th, 14th, and 15th of April each year, Jintana says that **“if it falls right in the middle of the work week, my family and I usually get together on a weekend near the new year.”**

Each day is dedicated to a specific aspect of New Year's traditions. The first day is actually the last day of the present year, so Jintana does **“things to symbolically start the next year ‘fresh,’”** like cleaning the house and preparing a lot of food for the celebrations to come.



For Jintana and her family, they often make a few different dishes including **khao tom**, which Jintana describes as **“steamed sticky rice parcels wrapped in banana leaf, very similar to a tamale or zongzi.”** The sticky rice can be filled with either sweet or savory fillings like banana or different meats. Jintana added that **“these are a really common food to give monks for alms giving, probably because it can be a really hearty snack and it’s convenient to place in the monks' bowl.”**

While **khao tom** is a common New Year's treat for Jintana and her family, her personal favorite New Year's dish is **kanom krok**, **“tiny little chewy tapioca pancakes that can be sweetened with coconut milk and shreds or made savory with minced meat.”** Once cooked, the cakes have a rich coconutty and herby smell. Because they require a careful eye to make sure they don't burn and they are best enjoyed hot and fresh, Jintana's family doesn't make them very often, but when they do, they use special pans specifically used to make **kanom krok**.

On the second day of Lao New Year's, Jintana takes time to pause. **“The second day is the day in between the two years. It's a time to rest and not work.”**



## Tapioca Pancake Recipe: Kanom Krok

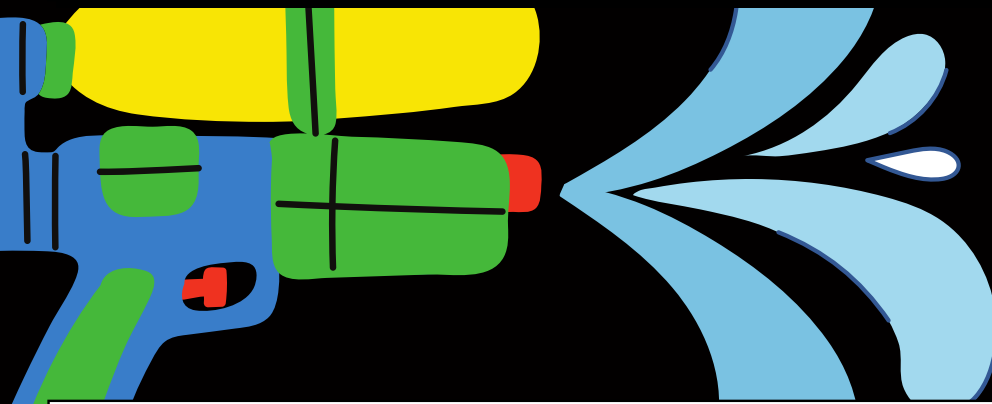
- 2/3 cup Rice flour
- 2 tbsp Sticky rice flour
- 1/4 cup Sugar
- 1 1/2 cups Coconut cream
- 2 thinly sliced Green onions tops (discard the white bottoms)
- 1/4 cup Water
- 1/2 teaspoon Salt

1. In a bowl, mix the rice flour, sticky rice flour, sugar, coconut cream, green onions, water and salt until smooth.
2. Place the pan on the fire, allowing it to thoroughly heat up. Or heat up the Dutch pancake pan on the stove. The pan needs to be hot enough or else the cakes will stick.
3. Grease each round with vegetable oil.
4. Pour the batter into each round. Some people use a teapot or a plastic water bottle to pour the batter. It makes it much easier!
5. Cook for 4-5 minutes. Check to see if the outsides are browned by gently pulling the sides away from the pan with an oiled spoon or small spatula.
6. Once the outsides are golden brown, gently lift the cake and flip it on top of another.
7. Enjoy!



# Celebrating with Community

The third day of Lao New Year is the first day of the new year, and is often a time for the largest of the celebrations. In Laos this can mean village or city-wide festivals and parties that involve many of special foods Jintana associates with the holiday and throwing water at each other. **“Water is a big part of Lao New Year. It signifies purity and goodwill.”**



In Seattle, it can sometimes be difficult to find celebrations that involve large water fights due to the weather in the area around the time. Despite this, Jintana’s family still makes sure that water is an important part of how they celebrate the holiday. **“My parents make this ‘holy water,’ which is regular filtered water scented with plumeria and then has a long candle that is burned into it.”** This holy water is also used to uphold one of the most important values of the holiday: **filial piety.**

**“To practice the virtue of filial piety, people are supposed to sprinkle the hands and feet of their elders with this water while praying and asking for blessings, so my brothers and I do this for our parents.”**

When the weather is warm and sunny, Jintana does try to participate in larger celebrations that can include water fights and festivals. In particular, a few years ago, Jintana was able to celebrate the new year in Auburn at Wat Washington Buddhavanaram. There, she gained some of her favorite memories of Lao New Years. **“My friends and I went down to a temple in Auburn (Wat Washington Buddhavanaram) because they had a big festival going on. We sprayed each other with water all day and ate delicious barbecue. It’s usually way too cold in Seattle to do this comfortably, but it was just perfect this year.”** She added that this was her first time celebrating Lao New Year after a long trip to Laos, where she gained a deeper understanding of the many Buddhist values and traditions that are a large part of Laos New Year.

While many of the specific ways that Jintana and her family are able to celebrate the holiday have changed in Seattle, whether it be because of weather or changes in the community, Jintana's family does their best to make sure the core values of the holiday are still shared and celebrated. **"Despite my parents' two homes being completely different environmentally and culturally, they still try their best to keep the values of the New Year alive, and that works just fine for our family. The values being community, filial piety, compassion, and giving alms."**

One of the ways that some Lao Americans teach the values of Lao New Year to the next generation is through different stories connected to or tied to the history of the holiday. Read the story below and see if you can find connections between the story and some of the values and ideas Jintana mentioned.

## Storytime

### A Story of Seven Sisters

One of the most important myths of Pi Mai Lao, or Lao New Year, is about Nang Sangkhan, or the Sangkhan Ladies. The myth that is most often told is that of the Sangkhan Ladies, all seven of them sisters, and how they preserved the world and their father after he passed away as a result of losing a bet.

Before their father died, the ladies were warned that after his passing, if his head were to ever touch the ground, a devastating fire would blaze throughout their kingdom. To prevent disaster, the sisters placed their father's remains in a cave that was not of this world. Each year one of the sisters makes the journey to the cave and tends to their father's body, as well as leads a procession around the base of the mountain where he is kept.

While the story itself is an important part of the myth, for traditions and celebrations, more focus is put on the sisters themselves. With seven sisters, there is one for each day of the week. The day of the week that Pi Mai Lao lands on determines which sister must lead the procession. Additionally, each sister has a flower, food, weapon, jewel, and animal associated with them.

# Finding New Meaning in Old Traditions

In recent years, Jintana has found that in addition to the ways that Lao New Year helps her connect to her family and heritage, celebrating Lao New Year is a way to connect with herself and her spirituality. Many Lao traditions, including many of those included in Lao New Year, are closely connected to **Theravada Buddhism**, one of the earliest schools of buddhism.

For Jintana, her family participates in many of the Buddhist traditions of the New Year such as visiting temples, praying at an altar, and participating in a wrist-tying ceremony or **baci soukhuane**. Baci soukhuane is **ceremony** where thread is tied around someone's wrist, and can represent many things and has shifted meaning for the community over the years. **"It's derived from a really ancient spiritual ceremony that is meant to 'tie' your body and spirit together. Nowadays, it's meant as a wish for well-being and good luck."**

The baci string for the ceremony has also become an important part of Jintana's family's altar, which Jintana often thinks of when she thinks of Lao New Year. Her family's altar is filled with a collection of items her parents have gathered over the years. **"[It] is filled with Buddhas and jewelry they've collected throughout their lives."**

## Reflection

For many families, including Jintana's, altars can represent a lot of important memories, values, and stories. Between the baci strings that represent good fortune to the Buddha statues that represent the different teachings and myths surrounding Buddhist traditions, altars can be a way to honor what is most important to you.

How do you remember and honor the important people and stories in your life? Do you have any items that remind you of important or special memories or people? Are there any items that remind you of the values you hold?

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While these are just a few of the many Buddhist traditions tied to Lao New Year that Jintana participates in when celebrating the holiday, they all help Jintana feel more connected to herself and her own spirituality. These traditions continue to help add meaning to Jintana's Lao New Year celebrations. **"Lao New Year is important to me because it's a time for me to be spiritual. I never felt religious or understood the Buddhist practices when I was young, but since I've learned more about it, I have so much more reverence for it. . . all the praying, blessing, and family time makes me feel like I'm being cared for in the universe."**

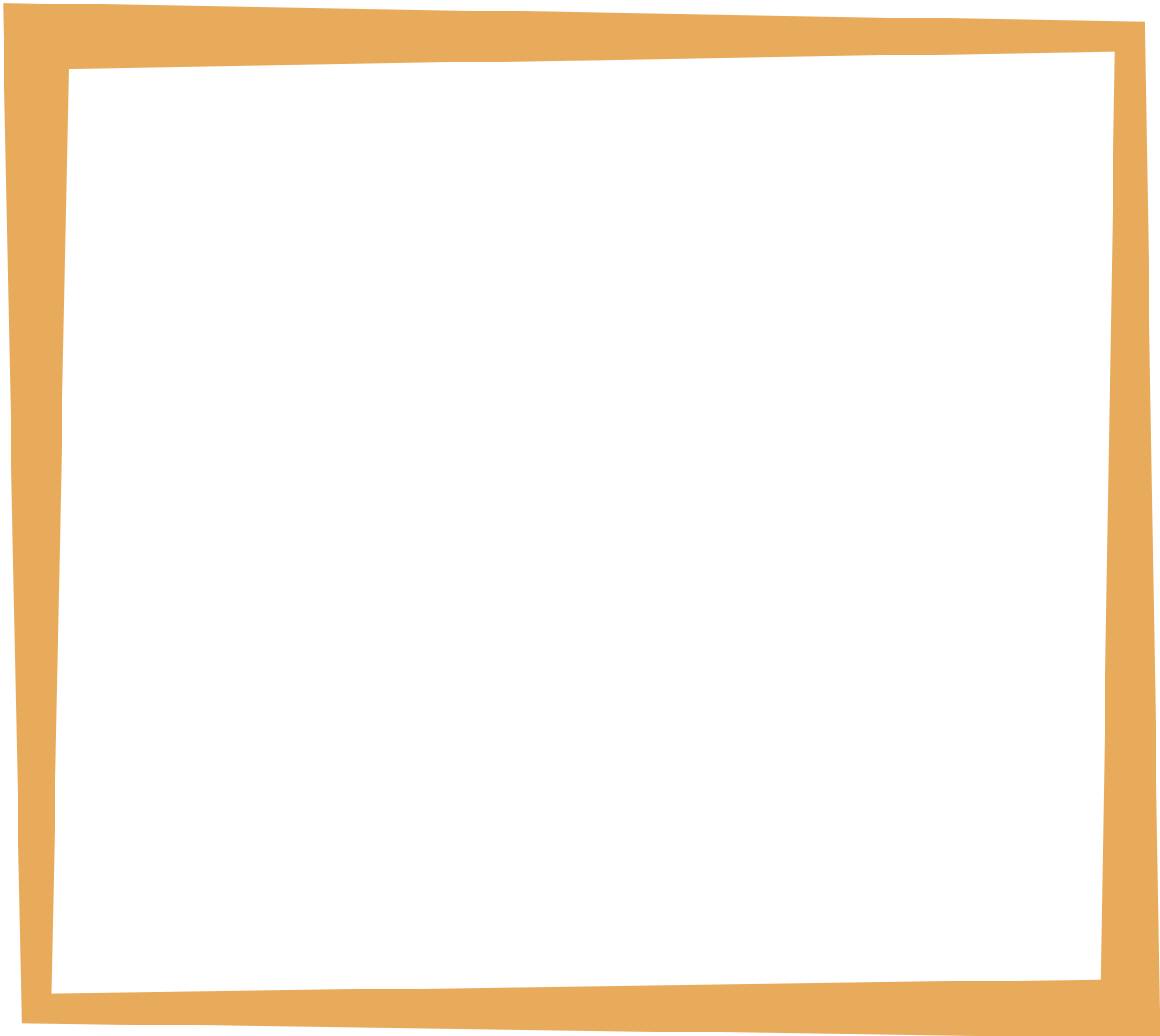
Between going to temple, participating in water fights, and visiting family at home, Jintana and her family celebrate Lao New Year in ways both traditional and new. While the values and importance of the holiday remain the same, Jintana understands that being a part of **diaspora**, or a group outside of their original homelands, can lead to celebrations and traditions changing. **"Being part of a diasporic family means adapting traditions and making them work wherever we are."**



# What Makes a Holiday?

So far, you have learned about some of the many foods, traditions, and values that make Lao New Year important to Jintana and her family. Take a moment to think about a holiday that is important to you.

In the box below, draw a mural of the foods and traditions you think of the most when you think of that holiday. Are there any special clothes you wear? Any special instruments or songs you hear? What about the foods you eat?



For Jintana, these blends of old traditions and new celebrations help make her community unique. Lao New Year is an opportunity for Jintana to uplift and acknowledge her **heritage** while also highlighting how her experiences as a Lao American have given her the opportunity to experience a wide variety of rich cultural traditions.

“Being Lao American to me means remembering, celebrating, and continually learning about my Laos heritage. This heritage is what makes me unique and what has guided my values in life. I am proud to be Lao American today, but that wasn’t always the case. I didn’t know a lot of Lao people growing up. In school, I was the first Lao person that a lot of my classmates had ever met. This always made me feel different, like I was invisible since I was a part of this culture that was unknown. Since then, I realized that people not knowing is more of a reflection on them than it is on me, and it’s a learning opportunity! I’ve also realized that just because the Lao community here is small, it doesn’t make the culture any less special and the traditions any less rich and beautiful.”

## Reflection

In addition to water fights and food, music and dance are an important part of many Lao new year festivals! In particular, Oy Pon Pi Mai is a special dance typically performed as a part of Lao New Year celebrations. [Watch this video of a group of young dancers performing their own Oy Pon Pi Mai.](#) Notice how their hands move. They are often used to represent different stages of growth or change, and they help the dance tell a story.

What are other ways we can tell stories without using words? Are there any kinds of performances or ways to tell stories that are important to the holidays you celebrate?

Think of a story that is important to you, and try to tell it without writing or saying any words.

## Vocabulary

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **ASSIMILATE:** When a minority group has to change or give up part or all of their culture to be accepted into the majority group.
- **ANCESTRY:** Someone's ethnic origin or background.
- **FILIAL PIETY:** The value of respect and honor for one's family.
- **BUDDHIST/BUDDHISM:** 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.
- **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.
- **DIASPORA:** A community that has been scattered around the world, no longer living in their homelands.
- **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.