

TEACHER'S CORNER: SOUTHEAST ASIAN NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS

[Editor's Note: Ang Robinson directs a new outreach project titled "New Americans--New Challenges" in the National Museum of Natural History's Education Office. The project's goal is to promote understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity between the American public and the newly arrived Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants in the greater Washington area.]

With more than a million Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants having settled in the United States since 1975, the American public has grown increasingly interested in the cultural heritage of these newcomers. Demographic change has prompted many school systems to develop educational materials on Southeast Asian history and cultures creating a better understanding of the cultural differences among students of South-east Asian heritage. This teaching activity describes how the Southeast Asian-American community, specifically the Cambodians, the Laos, and the Thais, celebrate New Year's Day and offers some suggestions for classroom activities.

The New Year's Celebration

The name of New Year's Day differs in each language. In Khmer, the Cambodian language, New Year's Day is called Col Chnam; in Laos, Boon Pee Mai, or the fifth month Boon; and in Thai, Wan Songkran, or the Water Festival. Col Chanm, Boon Pee Mai, and Wan Songkran are national holidays in Southeast Asia. They usually fall on April 13, when the sun leaves the sign of Pisces and enters the sign of Aries, according to astrologers. For centuries astrologers have been influenced by the Bramanic (Hindu) calculation, and they determine the length of the festivities. New Year's Day also marks the beginning of the rainy season, from April or May until the end of October, and the planting of rice after several months of hot, dry days. In upcountry Thailand, Wan Songkran is also an occasion for rain-invoking ceremonies if the reservoirs, ponds, and wells are dry and the sky offers no sign of rain.

City people generally celebrate the first day of the New Year while country people

welcome a new and happy year for at least three days. On the last day of the old year, and in preparation for the new, people clean out their houses to drive away any evil spirits, bad luck, or disaster that may have lingered over the year. The next day, actually the first day of the calendar new year, is a day of rest during which all work is forbidden. The following day is for the celebration of New Year's.

Col Chnam, Boon Pee Mai, and Wan Songkran are temple-centered ceremonies like many other religious holidays in Southeast Asia. While New Year's Day is a deeply religious holiday, it also is an occasion to integrate all kinds of activities involving food, games, and the arts, which may take place in town halls and in the open air.

Each household prepares food that is brought to the Buddhist temple either the evening before or the morning of New Year's to serve to the monks. Food offerings are a way of "making a merit" or performing a good deed (or Boon). After the monks eat the food, they chant and offer a blessing to the people, who receive this blessing in a wai (pronounced "y") position, with the palms of the hands pressed together, to show their respect to the monks. In the temple, men and women sit with both knees folded closely to their bodies, their feet directed away from monks and Buddha images as a sign of respect. Men also have the option of sitting cross-legged.



Besides food, people donate money, which is another way of "making a merit." They also bring flowers, incense sticks and candles, which they light in front of the Buddha images and make New Year's wishes. Buddha images are housed year round in the vihara, a central structure on the temple grounds, and for New Year's are placed in a small pavilion on an altar where they are accessible to the worshippers. In some places, Buddha images are carried in a procession through the streets.

The temple ceremony includes the sprinkling of flower scented water, blessed by the monks during the food-offering ceremony, over the Buddha images to cleanse them. The people form a line, and as they sprinkle water over the Buddhas, they make a wish asking for good health, a bright future, and happiness and prosperity for themselves and their families.

Another temple rite is the building of sand mountains, which can vary in size from a quite small to several feet high, and there are different beliefs associated with them. Some people believe that the number of grains of sand are equivalent to the number of years they will live or the amount of money they will make. The sand also has a practical use. The monks can build new construction on the temple grounds. Big silver bowls often are used to heap sand into little mounds to build a structure resembling a "chedi" or "stupa" (a large cone-shaped religious structure). In Southeast Asia, small stupas or chedis are also built along sandy river banks where temples and homes are located. These small sand mountains may be decorated with coins, strips of cloth, flowers, and paper flags, depicting an animal symbol from the Chinese zodiac.

Su-Kwan is an important element of the Lao/Northeastern Thai New Year's celebration. "Su" means "to invite" and "Kwan" refers to "the soul." Su-Wan is usually held on the third day of the festival when people visit respected figures of the community as well as relatives and friends who live outside the village. It is also a time for young people to ask their elders for forgiveness for any wrongdoing they might have done in the past year and for blessings for the year ahead. The host prepares a flower arrangement over which large numbers of white strings are draped. The family invites Moh pon, the blesser, the most knowledgeable member of the community, to lead the Su-Kwan

ceremony. Moh pon will chant a few magical formulas to chase away sickness, pain, suffering, and evil spirits and to beckon good spirits to return to the souls of the ceremony participants. Next is the blessing of the white strings. The Moh Pon makes a knot with a piece of string to symbolize a successful return of the soul. Then he ties the string around the wrist of a person to be honored by the family. The person who has been blessed should keep the string on for at least three consecutive days for good luck.

Evening is a time fun, games, and entertainment. People gather at the temple or town hall to enjoy traditional and folk dances, music, and drama after travelling through the streets sprinkling water on one another and eating and drinking and singing and dancing from village to village.

Most Southeast Asian-American communities have condensed their traditional three-day celebration of New Year's to one day to accommodate life in their new home.

Suggested Classroom Activities:

1. Research project. Group three to four students together. Each group chooses a Southeast Asian country and researches its geography, climate, ethnic groups, holidays and festivals. Then each group presents its findings to the class.

2. Interview a cultural specialist. Invite, a cultural representative to the classroom (a parent or student may be willing to participate). The following questions may be helpful:

a. Who in the community celebrates New Year's Day? (Consider age groups, clergy, and laity.) What are their roles? Are there some groups in the Southeast Asian community that do not celebrate the holiday?

b. What are the elements (religious and non-religious, crafts, foods, games and entertainment) of the celebration?

c. Where and when does the celebration take place?

d. How is knowledge and understanding of the celebration passed on in the family? In the community? How involved are parents, community, and religious organizations in passing on traditions such as the New Year's celebration? (Betty Belanus, SI Office of Folklife Programs, contributed to this activity.)

3. Class visit to a Buddhist temple.
4. Class or school organize a Southeast Asian New Year's celebration.
5. Food Preparation and Carving. Prepare a special Southeast Asian dish such as the following Laos recipe for Chicken Lap (Lap Kai), by Amorn Ker, or carve carrot flowers, instructions below by Nit Malikul.

Chicken Lap

1 lb. skinned boneless chicken, diced
 1/2 lb. chicken livers (opt.), diced
 1/2 lb. chicken gizzards (opt.), diced
 3 cloves garlic, sliced
 2 tbsp. chopped red onion
 4 tsp. anchovy sauce (if omit, use more fish sauce or salt to taste)
 2 tsp. fish sauce
 2 tsp. ground dried red chilies
 2 tbsp. dried galanga, finely chopped after soaking in hot water for one hour
 4 tbsp. lime juice
 1/2 tsp. salt
 2 tbsp. brown rice powder

For garnish:

4 tbsp. chopped scallion
 2 c. mint leaves
 1/2 c. coriander leaves

Brown chicken without oil for 2-3 minutes. In a separate pan, brown chicken livers and gizzards until cooked. Place the cooked chicken in a bowl and allow to cool for 5 minutes. Season meat with remainder of ingredients and mix well. Add brown rice and garnish. This dish goes well with lettuce, green beans, cucumbers, and radishes. Makes two to four servings.

Carrot Flowers

Needed: One large straight carrot
 One medium straight carrot
 One paring knife
 One curved knife

Steps:

1. Peel carrots; cut off about 3" from the stem end of the medium sized carrot.
2. Carve around the cut edge of the carrot to make it slightly tapered and round.
3. Across the cut end, cut small wedges about 1/8 inch apart at right angles to each other.

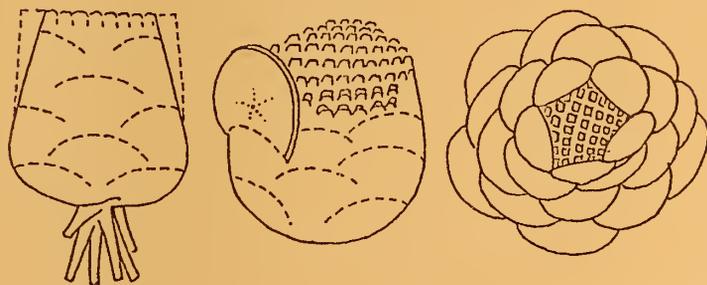
4. From the other side, the thick end of the medium carrot and the largest end of the large carrot, cut five sets of five of five thin slices each (a total of 25) for petals of graded sizes in uniform thickness and arrange them in proper order.

5. Using the curved knife and starting from the top (as shown in the sketch), cut the carrot in 5 half-moon cuts (not straight) for each of five rows, alternating the positions with each row. This will give you a total of 25 cuts in all.

6. The five cuts in each row must be evenly spaced and must be as near to each other as possible so as not to show the bare stem when the petals are arranged in rows.

7. As each row of cuts is completed, the petals must be inserted (by using the knife to open the cut) before making the next row of cuts.

8. After all the layers have been arranged, immerse the flower in water for about 10 minutes. During that time, all the petals will take on their natural curved shape.



Further Reading:

- Dommen, Arthur J. *Laos: Keystone of Indochina*. Westview Press, 1985
- Luangpraseuth, Khamchong. *Lao Culturally Speaking*. San Diego State University, 1987
- LeBar, Frank M. *Laos: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*.
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