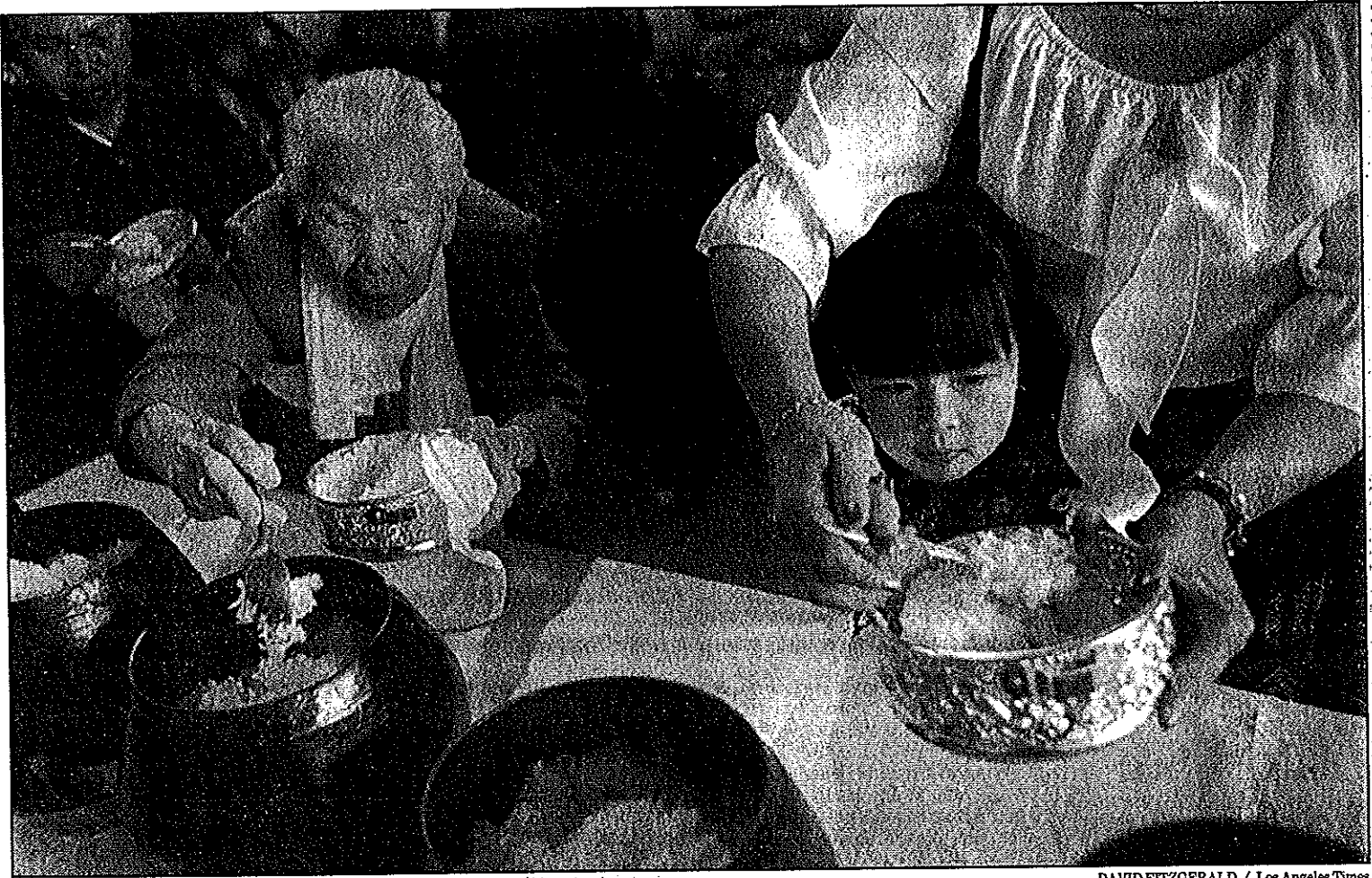


ORANGE COUNTY



DAVID FITZGERALD / Los Angeles Times

Houy Khon of Santa Ana, left, and Julie Caeng, 4, of Anaheim, take part in the traditional rice offering to ancestors at the Cambodian Family center.

New Year's Festival Keeps Traditions Alive

■ **Observance:** The Cambodian community mixes religion, customs and entertainment to usher in the Year of the Dog, which begins Wednesday.

By LYNN FRANEY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SANTA ANA—About 500 people celebrated their hope for the Cambodian new year on Saturday with a daylong festival of prayers, food and dancing at The Cambodian Family center here.

"It is important to get together," said Kieng Lim of Garden Grove, who brought her 3-year-old nephew to celebrate the Year of the Dog. "We ask for luck, spirit and longevity for the New Year."

The Cambodian New Year observance, which actually begins Wednesday and lasts three days, is

a reverential time in which offerings of rice are placed in incense-filled bowls as sustenance for dead ancestors.

The festivities also are marked by games for children and teenagers. According to a Cambodian tradition that has been lost over the years in the United States, the three days of New Year are the only time young boys and girls can play together, rather than being divided rigidly by sex.

Also, in Cambodia, people stay home for the three days of New Year, relaxing and playing. Cooking, cleaning and working are avoided.

On Saturday, Cambodian refugees from across Southern California gathered in Santa Ana to celebrate and pass along some of the traditions to their children. Older Cambodians sat in circles on the floor of a performance space, which was pressed into service as a Buddhist temple. The barefoot men and women, burning candles and

pungent incense at the feet of several monks in orange robes, prayed for their family members, both living and dead.

In another room, Cambodian youngsters competed for prizes at American-style game booths and amused themselves playing POGs, the decorated cardboard circles that have become popular with local children.

"New Year is a very big event for us," said 16-year-old Narin Keo, as he hung out with a group of teenagers who considered themselves too old for the games but also too unfamiliar with many of their parents' Buddhist customs to join the religious ceremony.

Keo, whose family came for the second year from Long Beach to participate, added: "We hope the New Year will bring good and will enrich the family."

Saturday's celebration was pushed inside when early morning rain pounded the pavement. The rain soaked dozens of families as

they slowly made their way to the festival on foot, across railroad tracks and along a rain gutter, from their apartments in the Minnie Street neighborhood, home to many Cambodian immigrants.

Each family brought rice for the ancestor offering in the traditional *chan sruck*—three engraved silver bowls stacked together and topped by a handle.

In the afternoon, 13 children in the Cambodian Family's youth program entertained the audience with traditional Cambodian folk dances that are performed throughout the year in Cambodia.

"We think that through the dancing, they can identify themselves," said Chea Lim, the youth coordinator for the Cambodian Family, a nonprofit organization that helps refugees from war-torn countries adjust to life in the United States. "They don't know if they're Cambodian or American. We're hoping that here they can feel something that is Cambodian."

Cambodian New Year in O.C.



DAVID FITZGERALD / Los Angeles Times

Sophal Nam, left, joins other Buddhist monks to observe the Cambodian new year at a Santa Ana

festival where participants mixed religion, tradition and games to greet the Year of the Dog. **B3**



CAMBODIAN NEW YEAR: Sounce Long, 10, waits his turn to perform a traditional dance during a Santa Ana observance of the upcoming Cambodian New Year. **B3**