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Celebration of heritage: Sok Kha, 9, performs a dance with a group of Cambodian children Saturday at The Cambodian Family center in Santa Ana. The event, attended by 200 people, was intended to let the children show what they learned during summer classes dealing with Cambodian language and customs. Story, Page B1

A special day



Paul Kuroda/The Orange County Register

Sokchan Ing, 12, prepares to dance with a group of Cambodian children Saturday at The Cambodian Family center in Santa Ana. It was part of a celebration designed to help bridge the cultural gap between the children's Cambodian roots and American upbringing.

CULTURE

Cambodian kids celebrate their roots

By Laura-Lynne Powell
The Orange County Register

SANTA ANA — Saturday's performances at The Cambodian Family center were a study in contrast.

Teen-age girls performed the delicate, straight-backed steps of ancient Cambodian folk dances. Boys followed with hip-hop, the rap dance they had learned watching MTV.

It was part of a celebration to show what the children learned

after a summer of free classes designed to help bridge the cultural gap between their Cambodian roots and American upbringing.

About 200 children and their families gathered for the performances in the Minnie Street neighborhood where 3,000 Cambodian refugees live.

The day featured poetry reading, storytelling and spelling bees in English and Cambodian.

"I like my children to learn

things Cambodian," said Than Ven, 56, whose daughter Silam insisted on participating in the Cambodian spelling bee even though she didn't feel well in the morning.

The 6-year-old dressed for the day in a lacy yellow dress and patent leather shoes.

Students take classes at the center to improve their English-language reading and writing.

But the classes also are designed to preserve their Cambodian heritage. They study Cam-

bodian language, dance and history.

On Saturday, Soknath Heng, 13, joined a group performing the Dance of Nature, a slow folk dance that featured girls in long gold skirts with pink roses in their hair.

The dance represents the beauty of her native land, said Heng, who left Cambodia when she was 3.

"I am Cambodian and I want to tell people a lot about who we are when I dance," she said.