



GLENN KOENIG / Los Angeles Times

Children await the arrival of Santa Claus at the annual Christmas party given by the Cambodian Family Inc. of Santa Ana.

Mixed Bag of Gifts

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SANTA ANA—The red-suited man with the white curly beard was gleefully greeted by a throng of children at the Cambodian Family Inc.'s annual Christmas party Saturday. But to the immigrant parents who accompanied them, Santa Claus was still a stranger.

Nevertheless, Buddhist and Christian culture blended happily at the 10th annual celebration, where traditional Christmas songs like "Jingle Bells" shared the stage with Cambodian folk dances, and games were explained in two languages.

"We are trying not to be religious at the center," said Chea Lim, youth coordinator for The Cambodian Family. "We are trying not to alienate parents."

Rifka Hirsch, executive director of the Cambodian Family, said the Christmas holiday underscores the cultural divide in many Cambodian families, where parents cling to old traditions while children become Americanized.

While most parents still practice Buddhism, she said, some of the children have become involved in activities such as camping at Christian churches.

Heather Lim, 27, a college graduate and social worker whose family moved from South Minnie Street in 1985 but still volunteers to help at the center, said for many Cambodian children the opportunity to celebrate Christmas "is very important. It makes them feel part of the United States and not left out."

But Lampheap Son, 10, said she enjoyed the games at the party because "they remind me of the games we play during the Cambodian New Year," which occurs in April.

For most of the 200 children and 40 adults, the party was a short walk from their homes on South Minnie Street, a poor

Cultures Blend as

Santa Claus Visits

Cambodian Enclave

at Christmas Party

neighborhood of apartments where immigrant Cambodian families have concentrated.

Many of the parents are unemployed or receiving public assistance payments, and will be financially unable to buy toys or Christmas trees, organizers said.

"For many of the children, this is the only Christmas they will have," said Mike Schumacher, who on weekdays works as Orange County's chief probation officer. Each Christmas, however, Schumacher takes advantage of his bearish size by playing Santa Claus.

Schumacher said he serves on the board of the Cambodian Family to help the children of South Minnie Street

avoid the drugs, gangs and crime that are all too prevalent in their neighborhood. Instead, he said, the center helps them acquire the skills they need to succeed in the American mainstream.

"I don't ever want to see them at the front door of my office unless they are applying for a job," Schumacher said as he prepared to make his entrance and pass out presents.

The center provides South Minnie Street children a safe refuge after school where they can do homework and take classes to upgrade their English-language skills, which tend to be weak because they speak only Cambodian at home, Hirsch said.

Hirsch noted that because of the poor economy, the Cambodian Family this Christmas received fewer donated gifts than usual from Toys for Tots and Disneyland. The message of Christmas, Hirsch told the children, is not receiving, but sharing.

Still, there were enough toys to distribute to 55 families, including all the children who participate in the community center's programs and their brothers and sisters.

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ORANGE COUNTY



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Chief Probation Officer Mike Schumacher dons his red apparel for the Cambodian Family annual party.

BRIDGING: Cultures Mix at Christmas

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Hirsch said that many of the thousands of Cambodian refugees who have settled in the South Minnie Street neighborhood since 1980 have obtained better jobs and moved to nicer communities. But the Cambodian adults left behind are primarily those who failed to adjust to the new culture, often because they could not learn English.

Chim Ing, 66, the father of five children ranging in age from 13 years to 18 months, said through an interpreter that he is on disability because of poor eyesight. His wife and children are on welfare, he said.

Ing, who arrived in the United States in 1985, said he and his wife are Buddhist, but his two eldest children attend a Christian church

and celebrate Christmas. He said he would like to have a Christmas tree for them, but their one-bedroom apartment is much too small for it.

Ing plans to give his children clothes for the holiday, not toys. "Clothes are more important," he observed. "If they go to school, they need something to wear. Toys they can do without."