

## Cambodia: Khmer New Year Festival



*Playing the Choung Game (Photo: Heu Chenda)*

Traditionally, the Khmer usually celebrate their new-year days on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April and the festival lasts for three days:

- The first day is known as Vara Maha Sankranta in Sanskrit - the Day of the Almanac. The phrase means 'passage of the sun or planets from one sign in the heavens to another.'
- The second day is known as Vara Vata in Pali. The phrase means the 'normal day or time.' It is an unimportant day of the festival.
- The third day is known as Vara Laung Saka in Khmer and Sanskrit.

The words describe the counting of the sequence of years or eras.

On the first day, usually the 13<sup>th</sup> April, people of each family prepare festival paraphernalia. These include a pair of Bay Sey, a pair of Sla Thoa, five incense sticks, five candles, a pair of bottles of perfume, five pieces of areca nuts, five betel leaves, drinks, traditional cultural cakes, and various kinds of fruit for greeting the New Year divinity. Each house is cleaned and at night decorated with oil lamps and colorful lanterns or, in modern times, with electric lights.

The preparatory festival paraphernalia and food offerings are used to satisfy the divinity that will come to power. The offerings are organised according to an ancient Khmer myth and legend known as "Samkranti Sot." For example, if the divinity coming to power is known to consume blood offerings, each family will prepare something which symbolises blood, like some red flowers or fruit for him/her. If another divinity is known to consume various kinds of offerings, like bean or sesame grains, they will offer him/her the real ones. The arrival of each divinity is forecast by a group of astrologers

and publicised on the radio and television. Each family greets the divinity by lighting incense sticks and candles, spraying themselves or their possessions with perfume, chanting prayers, paying homage to God or to the Buddhist trinity, and listening to Pin Peat music on the radio. And at each Buddhist temple, Buddhist monks or chaplains bang the Gong.

During the first day of the New Year Festival, Buddhist (especially the older generation), traditionally attend and congregate in a particular Buddhist temple to offer food to the Buddhist monks to ensure lives of happiness and prosperity, as well as for religious merit. They also chant prayers to the Buddhist monks and build sand stupas known as "Voluka Cetiya." As for the young, they enjoy playing traditional games, such as Angkunh, Teanh Proat, and Caol Choung.

During the second day and third day, the people enjoy different types of entertainment at the festival. They go out to resorts, attend Buddhist temples, or play traditional games.

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