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From left to right: Michelle Lin, Maruko Myint, Michelle Phyo Maung, Valerie Naing, Sandi Khine, Sara Su Madi Maung. Photo courtesy of Aung Naing/NetMAA

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A Look at Cultural Arts in the San Gabriel Valley



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It's a sizzling Saturday afternoon in July, but it's cool inside Monterey Park's Langley Community Center. Dancers of all ages spin and crouch and kick to the rhythm of the recorded drum beat and buzz of the *hne*, a Burmese wind instrument. A few parents chat at a table overflowing with food: a tray of noodles; a pan of homemade coconut agar jelly; a takeout box of Chinese dan tat; a bowl of very red, very American fruit punch.



Dancers Sandi Khine and Maruko Myint help younger students.

Burmese (or Myanmar) Americans, are a minority within a minority in the United States at less than 1% of the Asian population, numbering only about 100,000 people nationwide. Unlike the Chinese schools that proliferate in the San Gabriel Valley, there are no local Burmese schools for children to study the language and culture of their roots.

But there is dance.

Since 2006 the Network of Myanmar American Association (<http://netmaa.org/>)'s (NetMAA) dance group has been hosting events and, more recently, teaching dance classes. They have performed at festivals around the city and will be at Grand Park in Downtown LA for the Gracias Music Concert on the evening of August 14.

Sara Maung, a junior at Arcadia High School, joined the group last year. She left Myanmar when she was two, lived in New York at age four, and finally came to Los Angeles at age six.

"The United States is like a huge pot of everything, and sometimes it's hard to fit in," Sara said. Dance makes a difference. "Even if we're not surrounded by a lot of Burmese people, we can still have a strong hold of our culture."

But when she was younger, she disliked practicing Burmese dance because she wanted to blend neatly into American culture.

At 16 years old, Sara has begun to appreciate the "powerful sense of culture" that practicing Burmese

dance brings.

The Burmese dance group is part of a long history of migration of dances across borders. Immigrants “treasure their cultural traditions, and long to be able to present them in public or educational settings, but don’t always know how to do it,” said Professor Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy of the UCLA Department of Ethnomusicology. Catlin-Jairazbhoy studied Hmong immigrants in the 1980s who brought barely anything else with them to the US but their treasured instruments and memories of songs.

The NetMAA dancers and their family members meet on a weekly basis at the Langley Center in Monterey Park. KhineKhine Win, whose daughter Sandi Khine practices Burmese dance, says that Burmese people place high value on hospitality and geniality. There are no strangers at dance practice, and they advertise that anyone can participate. Usually more than 20 adults, teens, and children convene to learn and practice the unique dances from Myanmar’s seven major ethnic groups, which have evolved over the past 1500 years.

This past spring, for example, one of NetMAA’s groups focused on learning apyodawyein, a highly religious dance intended to appease spirits. It originates from the mountain villages near Mandalay, where the people believe that spirits called “nat” may protect them from ill fortune, if they are treated with respect.

“Usually, before we start dancing, we give a prayer, we bow, we specifically give a green coconut and three bananas to show that we truly respect them,” Sara says.

Even the traditional outfits that apyodawyein dancers wear are intended to please the spirits; the garments are made of silk to show prosperity, and an apyodawyein dancer will tie a bow around her body to symbolize a connection between dancer and spirit.

“Whenever we’re dancing, we’re not dancing with low spirits,” Sara says. “We’re always really smiling and laughing and it’s really tiring, but...we still enjoy it and want to keep on doing it because there’s some sort of feeling in the song to keep us excited.”

Watch NetMAA perform at the Gracias Music Concert in Grand Park on August 14 at 7:30 p.m.

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