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**Ponn Yinn; Flutist Survived Pol Pot Scourge**

By NANCY WRIDE, Times Staff Writer

Ponn Yinn, a flutist and elder of a troupe of traditional Cambodian performers whose rescue from a refugee camp helped preserve a culture once threatened with extinction by Khmer Rouge forces, has died. He was 82.

Yinn died Monday of a stroke in Long Beach, his family said, more than 25 years after he escaped certain death at the hands of Pol Pot's soldiers by playing a makeshift flute.

Yinn was among about 25 artists trained in a classical form of music and dance inextricably linked to Buddhism and the Cambodian royalty, said Amy Catlin, visiting assistant professor at UCLA's department of ethnomusicology.

"It's a very refined and exquisite form of music, and the dancers in particular have an important sacredness. . . . They traveled with the king who democratized the country," Catlin said.

Years after the fall of the Cambodian monarchy, the performers were discovered in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border by a Swiss documentarian and an American health care worker, Catlin said.

"At that time, it was feared that the Cambodian culture had been almost destroyed because the Khmer Rouge wanted to wipe out any threat to non-proletarian culture, especially ties to the palace," said Catlin, who met Yinn and the troupe in Thailand in 1980 while curating the Southeast Asian performance of the Smithsonian Institution's first festival of folk life.

Yinn "was the most senior and knowledgeable instrumentalist affiliated with the palace, an exquisite performer on the flute," Catlin said. "He was soft-spoken, gentle, but a leader who was deferred to by the performers."

For nearly 20 years after his relocation, Yinn taught music to adults and children at United Cambodian Community Inc., a cornerstone in the Long Beach refugee population of approximately 50,000; it's thought to be the largest Cambodian community outside Southeast Asia. He also helped form a children's orchestra.

"He was a very respected member of the community, especially with the musicians and artists," said Sophiline Shapiro, a Cambodia native and project director of the agency's Arts of Apsara Cultural Center.

Yinn's first instruments were the tro, a two-stringed violin, and chhung, which are finger cymbals, but he most often taught with the flute that saved his life.

Yinn's path from Cambodian royal palace performer to modest music instructor was well known among artists in Long Beach's Cambodian community.

According to a biography of Yinn that has been compiled over the years by staff members at the Cambodian community center, he was 16 when he left his home to study music and join a local orchestra.

He performed with that ensemble and other small orchestras until the Royal Police Band was created in 1954. This troupe traveled from province to province, performing at national theaters and ceremonies. By 1975, Yinn had worked under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then Gen. Lon Nol, as principal musician and teacher with the Classical Symphony of the Army for the Royal Ballet.

But with the victory of the infamous Pol Pot that year, Yinn was part of the exodus from Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, to the countryside. What followed was the genocide of between 1 million and 2 million people. Separated from his family members, Yinn believed many of them had been killed.

He was discovered by Khmer Rouge forces during their drive to uncover and eliminate the country's intellectuals and artists. He begged for his life and convinced his accusers that he was just a steelworker who liked to play the flute.

The soldiers initially did not believe him and demanded that he prove his story. Yinn did so by taking a bicycle handlebar and punching holes in it to play like a flute. This kept him alive, but he was forced to play the makeshift flute nightly into loudspeakers to drown out the screams of people being slaughtered in nearby fields.

In 1979, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, Yinn and legions of others were able to make their way through the treacherous mine fields into Thailand.

At the refugee camp, Yinn became head of an orchestra called the Khmer Classical Dance Troupe. While thousands lived in the camps for years, Yinn and other troupe members were resettled in Washington, D.C., in 1980 with help from groups like the Indochinese Refugee Action Center in Washington, the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the National Council for the Traditional Arts, Catlin said.

The artists were resettled en masse and housed in the same apartment building in Wheaton, Md. Yinn's 19-year-old son is named after the town.

For four years Ponn Yinn was a member of an orchestra that accompanied Cambodian classical dance in performances at the Kennedy Center and other cultural institutions in the East. In 1984, by then in his 60s, he joined relatives who had settled in Long Beach.

Paid through numerous grants won by the Cambodian community center from the California Arts Council, Public Corporation for the Arts and private foundations, Yinn taught music for more than 20 years; he also formed bands that accompanied traditional Cambodian dance and opera performances.

His harrowing tale and talent touched non-refugees as well.

"The bicycle handle, he took that flute with him everywhere," said Bonnie Lowenthal, a Long Beach City Council member who worked with Ponn as arts program manager at the community center from 1989 to 1994. "I had him play

that flute at my swearing-in. I wanted people to hear the sound of courage."

Yinn had rebuilt his life in this country, and found great happiness passing on arts traditions to a generation of Cambodians growing up with mostly American culture.

After his health declined in December, Yinn remained mostly retired from teaching.

He is survived by his wife, three teenage sons and a daughter.

Donations may be made in honor of Yinn to the United Cambodian Community Inc., 2338 E. Anaheim St., Long Beach, CA 90804.  
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