



A River Changes Course

2013 • Running time 83 minutes • Directed by Kalyanee Mam •

Distributed by Migrant Films and the Documentation Center of Cambodia

Twice a year in Cambodia, the Tonle Sap River changes course, while life for the Khmer people continues to flow in a perpetual cycle of death and rebirth and of creation and destruction. Working in an intimate verité style, filmmaker Kalyanee Mam spent four years in her homeland following three young Cambodians as they struggled to overcome the crushing effects of deforestation, overfishing, and overwhelming debt. A breathtaking and unprecedented journey from the remote mountainous jungles and floating cities of the Cambodian countryside to the bustling garment factories of modern Phnom Penh, *A River Changes Course* traces a devastating and beautiful story of an ancient culture ravaged by globalization.

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Face to Face Media 2019



A River Changes Course



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WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Relations between religion and environmental justice are not explicitly explored in this documentary, even though some participants are noticeably Muslim. However, I selected the documentary for the profoundness and humanity with which it looks at the everyday world of ordinary Cambodian people. Although affected by the pressures of economic development, globalization, and environmental change, they still manage to persevere and strive for a better future.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Activism	Ethnography
Anthropology	Geography
Asian Studies	Global Studies
Bioregions and Habitat	History
Climate Change	Media Studies
Environmental Science	Political Science

SYNOPSIS

“We’ve worked so hard on this land,” says Sav Samourn. “And now they’ve come to destroy it all. Sooner or later it will all be gone.” In her directorial debut, award-winning filmmaker Kalyanee Mam travels to her homeland to capture the stories of three young Cambodians struggling to maintain their traditional way of life while the modern world closes in around them.



Deep in the jungle, Sav struggles as large companies encroach upon the land and “progress” claims the life-giving forests. She discovers there’s little room for wild animals, ghosts, and the home she has always known. In a fishing hamlet, Sari Math must quit school to help support his family. But as the fish catch dwindles, Sari and his family find their livelihood threatened. Meanwhile, Khieu Mok must leave her village to seek work in a Phnom Penh factory to help pay her family’s debts. But city life proves no better, and Khieu struggles between her need to send money home and her duty to be with her loved ones.

From Cambodia’s forests to its rivers and from its idyllic rice fields to the capital’s pulsing heart, forces of radical change are transforming the landscape of the country—and the dreams of its people.

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"Mam's camera work is exquisite in its immediacy and agility. One of the most striking aspects of her film is the intimacy it achieves without feeling intrusive or turning her subjects into fodder for a message."—Sheri Linden, Los Angeles Times

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Set in the context of Cambodia's changing economic and environmental landscapes, the documentary sheds light on fundamental challenges people face in the effort to eat, make a living, and have a meaningful family life.

BACKGROUND

From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime, led by Pol Pot, forced the urban population to work on rural work collectives and in the process persecuted and took the lives of millions of people. Many Cambodians today are still recovering from the trauma of that period. Other challenges remain for this country, despite or because of its economic growth over the past few decades. Rural poverty remains high. A large portion of the population works in the informal economy, mostly in agriculture, forestry, and fishing and in small and micro-enterprises. The formal sectors of garment production and tourism are the main engines of growth, with garment manufacturing accounting for most of Cambodia's exports.

The Mekong River's fisheries contribute significantly to the region's economy. (The Tonle Sap River connects the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap Lake.) However, hydroelectric power projects threaten to jeopardize fragile ecosystems and, subsequently, livelihoods, as well as the river's fisheries. The consequences are significant for Laos and Cambodia, where fishery and agricultural production from the Mekong River accounts for much of their respective gross domestic products.

The Cambodian economy is predominantly agrarian, with agriculture employing a large portion of its population. Chronic poverty, landlessness, and natural disasters such as droughts and floods compel many rural Cambodians to migrate to other rural areas, urban areas, or neighboring countries to seek work, often in less skilled jobs in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. Land concessions constitute a major threat to the livelihoods of indigenous communities. Most of Cambodia's population of about 15 million identifies as Theravada Buddhist, with Muslims, Christians, and people following indigenous traditions comprising much of the rest.

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KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

A remote jungle in northern Cambodia

The Tonle Sap River in central Cambodia

A village outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia

A cassava plantation in western Cambodia

Sav Samourn – a woman who lives with her family in a jungle in northern Cambodia

Sari Math – a young boy who lives with his Muslim family on a floating village on the Tonle Sap River and eventually goes to work on a cassava plantation

Khieu Mok – a young woman who goes to Phnom Penh to work in the garment factories

FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

A River Changes Course tells the story of three individuals and their families living in contemporary Cambodia as they face hard choices forced by rapid development and struggle to maintain their traditional ways of life as the modern world closes in around them. The documentary tells their stories simultaneously, and summaries of these individuals provide a useful way to distill the film.

Sav Samourn

In the remote and mountainous jungles of northeast Cambodia, Sav and her family live in a thatched hut perched on a hill surrounded by cashew orchards, golden rice fields, and thick, dense forest. All around her, she witnesses the encroachment of large companies and the slashing and clearing of forests. Sav discovers she is no longer afraid of the wild animals and ghosts that once roamed the forests she calls home. Now she is afraid of people as they radically change the world in which she and her family live.

Sari Math

The great Tonle Sap River in central Cambodia is home to a diversity of fish and wildlife, and the floating village on the river is home for Sari and his family, who depend on fishing for a living. But life on the river has changed rapidly due to fishing concessions, large fish traps, and the rise of illegal fishing. Sustained education also remains difficult for many. As Sari stands on his boat and faces the horizon, he wonders in what direction the future will take him. That future eventually brings him to work on a cassava plantation in western Cambodia.

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Khieu Mok

In a small village outside the capital city of Phnom Penh, Khieu and her mother bring in their annual rice harvest. To help make ends meet, she and her family must borrow money to buy land and a water buffalo. To pay back their mounting debt, Khieu prepares to join the truckloads of young people who have already left the village to find work in the garment factories of Phnom Penh. While in the capital, Khieu struggles with its distance from her mother and family back home.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The selection presents a number of complex issues, sometimes subtly presented. Develop a list of the key issues you see in the selection, both explicit and implicit.

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1. If Sari Math and Khieu Mok are suggestive of larger patterns in Cambodian labor, what are the flows of people and work across Cambodia? Do those flows affect different people in different ways? Why or why not?
2. Compare and contrast what you see in terms of the experiences of Sav Samourn, Sari Math, and Khieu Mok. How are their experiences similar? How are they different?
3. As seen in the selection, where, if at all, do concerns about pollution enter into the lives of the people of Cambodia? Sav Samourn and her family are often sick or sickly. What could be the causes? What should be done to find out? Is anyone responsible for helping them and others figure things out?
4. Toward the end of the film, does Sav Samourn seem hopeful for the future? Discuss your thoughts on her comments on the loss or sale of land.
5. The theme of education appears repeatedly in the documentary. Based on the selection, explain any possible relations you see between economic change, environmental issues, and education, in particular as evidenced by Sari Math's closing comments, which are drawn, in part, from his first meeting with the filmmaker several years prior.
6. In the closing scene of the film, the filmmaker plays a direct participant role by talking with Sari Math. Why do you think Kalyanee Mam opts for this approach?
7. Twice a year, the Tonle Sap River reverses direction. Is the title of the film an effective metaphor for the transformations represented in the selection? Why or why not?

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SHORT VERSION

Where time is limited, an excerpt from the program may be viewed. Students can view a 23 minute excerpt from the long film starting at 57 minutes and ending with the conclusion of the program at 1 hour, 20 minutes. The excerpt focuses on financial and other hardships and family matters for Sav Samourn, Sari Math, and Khieu Mok.

ACTIVITIES



1. Have the students pursue a geographical mapping project, focusing on rivers, urban centers, and peripheral areas, identifying the flows of people within and across Southeast Asia, as well as any plantations, factories, dams, etc., built by Chinese or other foreign companies or with their aid.
2. The documentary raises some implicit points about China's concerns for food (e.g., by way of the cassava plantation). Conduct a study of Cambodia's cassava production. Is there a global market for cassava? Where does it go? Does it go only to China?
3. The focus of the documentary is the ethnographic present, and, as such, it does not address Cambodia's modern history or its historical cultures, its entanglements with colonial power, or its experiences under Pol Pot, which include the repression of its religious traditions. Have students explore Cambodia's past and bring the results of their digging to class via pictures, videos, or poster presentations. How, if at all, are facets of Cambodia's past relevant to what we see in the documentary?
4. The [website](#) for *A River Changes Course* has a helpful series of interactive maps showing the changing land use across the country since 1993. (Scroll down for the interactive maps and land use history.) Have the students study these maps and present on relevant matters concerning such issues as resource and environmental planning, forestry, conservation, and international development.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Film website: <http://ariverchangescourse.com/about/>

UNDP: About Cambodia – provides some snapshots of Cambodia's history, challenges, and successes:

<http://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/countryinfo/#History>

The Lake Clinic Cambodia: www.lakeclinic.org/mission/

Fight for Areng Valley, a short op-doc in the *New York Times* by Kalyanee Mam, focuses on Chong people in a southwest valley in Cambodia joining with Buddhist monks to oppose a hydroelectric dam. Featured is a tree-robing ceremony, a recent importation of Buddhist environmental tree "ordinations" in Thailand. The 10-minute film can be viewed with an introduction by the filmmaker [here](#).



"Ms. Mam captures with care and sympathy the unique details of her subjects' lives and the magnificent landscape which they inhabit... They are tied not merely materially but spiritually to the earth on which they walk, which they farm, to the waters which they fish, and Ms. Mam explores these connections with the straightforwardness and minimalism that match her subjects' lives." — Dmitry Zvonkov, Stage and Cinema