



ក្បួនជីវិត

# A RIVER CHANGES COURSE

WORLD CINEMA  
GRAND JURY PRIZE  
DOCUMENTARY  
2013  
SUNDANCE  
FILM FESTIVAL

*In a land of stunning beauty and rapid change,  
the people chart a course into the unknown.*

MIGRANT FILMS presents in association with The DOCUMENTATION CENTER of CAMBODIA. A film by KALYANEE MAM "A RIVER CHANGES COURSE"  
Cinematography by KALYANEE MAM Edited by CHRIS BROWN Music by DAVID MENDEZ Sound Edit by ZACH MARTIN Sound Design by ANGLE YESSON Color Grading by DAVID LORTSHER  
Associate Producer CHRIS BROWN Executive Producer YUUK CHHANG Producer RATANAK LENG Supported by a grant from The JOHN D. and CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION  
With core support provided by The U.S. AGENCY for INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID) and SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (Sida) Directed and Produced by KALYANEE MAM

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DOCUMENTATION CENTER of CAMBODIA

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# ក្បួនរំលឹកខ្លួនឯង

## A River Changes Course

a film by  
KALYANEE MAM

2013 Sundance Film Festival  
(World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Documentary)  
2013 Atlanta Film Festival  
(Documentary Feature Grand Jury Prize)  
2013 Bermuda Docs Film Festival  
2013 Environmental Film Festival, DC  
2013 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival  
(Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award)  
2013 Environmental Film Festival at Yale  
2013 RiverRun International Film Festival  
2013 Nashville Film Festival  
2013 San Francisco International Film Festival  
2013 DokFest, Munich  
2013 Green Film Festival in Seoul  
2013 Lincoln Film Society - Season Of Cambodia  
2013 The Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival  
2013 The Museum of Modern Art ContemporAsian Film Program

83 minutes • Cambodia/USA • In Khmer & Jarai w/English subtitles • 16:9

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## SYNOPSIS

“Today,” remarks Sav Samourn, “everyone needs land.”

Winner of the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Documentary at Sundance, *A River Changes Course* tells the story of three families living in contemporary Cambodia as they struggle to maintain their traditional ways of life while the modern world closes in around them.

In the deep jungles of Cambodia, Sav Samourn and her family depend on the forests for their food and livelihood. But with the encroachment of large companies and the slashing and clearing of forests, Sav Samourn soon discovers there is no room for wild animals and ghosts in the forests she calls home.

In a fishing village on the Tonle Sap River, Sari Math is forced to quit school to help support his family. But as the fish catch steadily dwindles, Sari and his family realize their lives as fishermen are changing forever.

In a small village outside of Phnom Penh, Khieu Mok must leave and find work in a garment factory to support her family’s mounting debt. But life in the city proves no better and Khieu finds herself torn between her obligations to send money home and her duty to be at home with her family.

From a remote northern jungle, down along the Tonle Sap, to the rice fields in the country’s center and the pulsing heart of urban Phnom Penh, the radical changes in Cambodia today are transforming not only the country’s landscape – but also the dreams of its people.



## DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

My first trip to Cambodia was in 1998, only seventeen years after my family fled this war-torn country. I was shocked by much of what I saw – the poverty, desperation, and corruption that plagued the country. But I was also deeply affected by the beauty that surrounded me – the beauty of the landscape, the people, the ancient culture, and the many smiles that greeted me in my journey.

Over a decade later, globalization has transformed the Cambodian landscape. Dirt roads have been replaced with highways and high-rise department stores clog the city. The small streets of Phnom Penh bulge with traffic, the oversized SUVs incongruent to the narrow boulevards, its factories overfilled with young women making jeans and shirts for designer labels in the United States.

In the global race for low-wage workers and natural resources, Cambodia has transformed its ancient agrarian culture to compete for international investment. I made this film to document the human cost of this transformation. And to put a human face on the beautiful traditional livelihoods that may soon be lost to the world forever.

With our camera equipment and supplies, Cambodian Producer, Ratanak Leng and I traveled to three distinct parts of Cambodia – to the remote jungles of Ratannakiri in the Northeast, the floating villages of Kampong Chhnang in Central Cambodia, and the countryside of Svay Rieng just outside the capital city of Phnom Penh, to live with and document the lives of three young Cambodians and their families.

### **SAV SAMOURN – THE REMOTE JUNGLES IN NORTHEAST CAMBODIA**



In the Northeast, we hired and packed nine motorcycles with our equipment, food, water, and a small generator to provide power for uploading footage onto our hard drives. We placed the motorcycles on boats, crossed a tributary of the Mekong River, and climbed nine mountains to reach Sav Samourn and her family living in the deep jungles. There, we trekked through thick forests, bathed in the local spring, and

slept in a small hut where the family stored their rice grains and chickens. Our mornings began at 4, when the cocks crowed and the light was still cool and soft. We bathed in the stream in the afternoon and began preparing for bed around 7, when only the light of the stars shone in the sky.

Sav Samourn is Jarai, one of 24 indigenous groups with a distinct language and culture living in Cambodia today and dependant solely on the land and forests for their food and livelihood. Sav Samourn and her family have no access to electricity, markets, or even education. Our

visit was the first time she and her family had ever seen a camera, let alone one that captured moving pictures.



The film opens with one of Sav Samourn's daughters, Cha, chopping sugar cane. I remember vividly the day we captured this scene. We followed Cha down a steep hill into a wooded area enclosed by forests of banana trees and sugar cane. As this little girl grasped the sugar cane in her hand and began chopping, I was mesmerized. I had never in my life seen an eight years old child

so strong, adept, and precise. As she chopped, she stared once into the eyes of the camera, and I knew she was neither looking at me, nor at the camera. She was peering into the souls of all of us.

Life for Sav Samourn and her family is changing rapidly. Although she may not be able to grasp the global realities behind this change, I know she can *feel* the immediate and intense impact. The first time I interviewed Sav Samourn, she was seated in a small hut surrounded by golden rice fields with the jungles rising behind us, just beyond. The rain was a misty haze and one of her daughters, Yun, was plucking silver strands from her head. It was the first time it had rained in months and Sav Samourn knew the harvest would not be good that year. I asked her why it had been so dry. She said the elders blame the dry spell on all the forests that have been cut down.

## **SARI MATH – THE TONLE SAP RIVER IN CENTRAL CAMBODIA**

The Tonle Sap is one of the largest and diverse bodies of freshwater in the world. Sari and his family live in a small floating village on the river. The very first time I met Sari, he was only 14 years old. I was immediately enamored by his precocity, his expressiveness, and good nature. He took us to their local floating mosque, picked up a Koran, and immediately began chanting a verse. We spent the rest of the day visiting his home and then riding a boat towards the edge of the lake in search of water hyacinth blossoms. We never found the blossoms, but along the way Sari told us the story of his family, his dreams of going to school, getting a good job, and providing for his family.

Two years later, we returned to that same village and began to capture how Sari's life had changed since we first met him. By that time, Sari was 16 years old, had already quit school, and was fishing with his father full time. Sari would row his siblings to school in the morning and spend the entire day fishing with his father in the open waters of the Tonle Sap. Sometimes, when the fishing spots were further out, we would leave at 3 o'clock in the morning, cast the nets, wait a few hours, draw in the nets, and cast the nets again. When they drew in the nets, Sari's father would show us the fish they caught and point to particular ones

he had noticed were becoming scarcer each year. He would pepper his remarks with recipes for how to cook certain fish and then talk about why the fish were becoming extinct – large fishing concessions, large fish traps, and the rise of illegal fishing, including the use of dynamite.



In addition to school and fishing, Sari’s religious and cultural identity was also an important aspect of his story. Sari and his family are Cham Muslim, a small and distinct ethnic group in Cambodia that practices Islam. It took two years for me, a non-Muslim woman, to gain access and film inside the mosque. But once I entered the mosque, I realized how integrated and connected their

religion and culture was to their way of life and to fishing. For hundreds of years these villages depended on fishing for their livelihood. Once the fish disappears, so might also this particular religion, culture, and language that bind their lives together.

## **KHIEU MOK – THE COUNTRYSIDE AND THE CAPITAL CITY OF PHNOM PENH**

Khieu’s story was probably the most challenging story to tell as her life moved back and forth between the countryside and the city. I remember the first evening I was introduced to Khieu and her two sisters, one brother, and one brother-in-law, all five of them living in a small dormitory the size of a walk-in closet.

Khieu was working in a shoe factory at the time. She had been working in the same shoe factory for over five years and was beginning to experience pain in her chest and problems with her digestive system. She told me the factory lacked ventilation and she was given no mask to wear to protect her from the noxious fumes.

Only a few weeks after I began filming her in her dormitory, Khieu decided she would return home to recover from her illness. Khieu is one of eight children, with a single mother forced to raise her children on her own. Khieu’s mother left her husband who abused her, and unusual for a Cambodian woman living in the countryside, took her husband to court, legally divorced him, and demanded her rights to their joint property. But Khieu’s mother still got very little from the settlement. They had to start from scratch and buy new land and build a new home. And so, Khieu and her family found themselves in debt.

Khieu remained at home in the countryside for six months before she finally decided to return to the city and find work in a garment factory. She had become restless in the country. There was nothing to do at home, no market to shop in, no electricity, no lights, and no television to watch. Debt was also weighing heavily on the family and Khieu needed to find work to support

her young brothers' education. Khieu eventually leaves for the city only to return home again when her mother complains of the hard work she must endure alone at home.

At first, I was frustrated with Khieu's story, shuffling back and forth between the country and the city, with plans always indefinite. But Khieu's indecisiveness is not unique. It represents the lives of all factory workers who are torn between their lives and families at home and fresh opportunities to work in the city. This indecisiveness explains Khieu's longing to have the city come to her village. If a factory could be built in her village life would be perfect, she says. She would never have to leave her mother, her family, or her village to find work in the city. And once the factories were built, of course there would be roads, markets, and most important of all, electricity.



Khieu's statement was expressed from the heart and encapsulates the complexity and challenges of development in Cambodia and all over the world. We all seek to better our lives with opportunities and technology. However, in the process of improving our lives, we must also ask ourselves, how do we impact our own lives, the lives of others, our environment, and ultimately, the world that we live in?

At the core, the stories of Khieu, Sari, and Sav Samourn reflect the relevant issues facing all of us today. It is the environmental story of deforestation, overfishing, biodiversity, and conservation. It is the human story of development, migration, globalization, and overwhelming debt. But most importantly, it is the universal story of struggle, survival, love, family, and hope.

Khieu, Sari, and Sav Samourn impressed me most with their strength and conviction to determine their own destiny and future. One of my most treasured clips from the film is at the end when Sav Samourn puts on her hat and gazes into the future with a look of fierceness and determination. The companies may come, the forests may be cut down, but her life and the lives of her children will always endure. It is this tenacity, the same tenacity that ensured the survival of so many families during the Khmer Rouge period, including my own, that gives me hope for Cambodia's future.

This is a decisive moment for Cambodia. And so it is also a decisive moment for the world. How do we find balance? How do we advance and develop without destroying ourselves in the process? By delving deeply into the lives of families directly affected by development and globalization, we hope this film, *A River Changes Course*, will invite viewers not to draw simple conclusions, but to ask questions that demand thoughtful answers *and* action.

## **SUBJECT BIOS**



**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. As the eldest boy in a family of six children, Sari was forced to quit school at the age of 14 to help support his family. But life on the river has changed rapidly. Due to large fishing concessions, large fish

traps, and the rise of illegal fishing, the catch is diminishing and Sari and his family are struggling to catch even enough fish to survive. As Sari stands on his boat facing the horizon, Sari wonders what direction the future will take him.



**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. And 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 garment factories in

Phnom Penh. But in the bustling city, Khieu soon realizes that her life and the lives of all factory girls are divided in half, between their duty to send money home to the village, and their duty to be there with their families. As she awaits the ferry that will bring her back home again, Khieu reflects on how she and her family will survive away from the city.





**SAV SAMOURN** – In the remote and mountainous jungles of Northeast Cambodia, Sav Samourn and her family live in a thatched hut perched on a hill surrounded by cashew orchards, golden rice fields, and thick, dense forest. She belongs to one of 24 indigenous groups that remain in Cambodia and that depend on the land and forest for their food and livelihood. All around her, she

witnesses the encroachment of large companies and the slashing and clearing of forests. Sav Samourn discovers she is no longer afraid of wild animals and ghosts that once roamed the forests she calls home. Now, she is afraid of people.

## FACTS ABOUT CAMBODIA

### A VIOLENT PAST



From 1975 - 1979, the Khmer Rouge Regime, led by Pol Pot, evacuated the urban centers and forced the entire population to work on rural work projects. The Khmer Rouge took the lives of nearly 2 million people. The woman pictured above was visiting Tuol Sleng, an infamous torture center, for the first time when she accidentally came upon a photo of her long-lost brother. Thousands of

Cambodians today are still longing for their loved ones and recovering from the psychological scars of that period. SOURCE: [dccam.org](http://dccam.org)

### POVERTY



Cambodia has a population of 14.3 million people. In 2011, Cambodia's GDP quadrupled, increasing from \$216 per capita in 1992 to \$909 per capita in 2011. From 1994 to 2011, Cambodia experienced an average growth rate of 7.7 percent. Although the rate of poverty continues to decline in Cambodia, rural poverty remains obstinately high at 40 per cent. Eighty-five per cent of the

population is in the informal economy, mostly in agriculture, forestry, and fishing and in small and micro-enterprises. The formal sectors of garments and tourism are the main engines of growth, with garment manufacturing accounting for 85 per cent of Cambodia's exports and employing some 350,000 workers, mostly women. SOURCE: [UNDP-Cambodia](http://UNDP-Cambodia) and [ilo.org](http://ilo.org)

## DAMS & FISHERIES



The total economic value of the Mekong's fisheries is between \$5.6 billion and \$9.4 billion a year, contributing significantly to the region's economy. However, hydropower projects threaten to jeopardize this fragile ecosystem and, subsequently, the livelihoods of millions of people. Ultimately, dam building places the river's fisheries in danger. About 35% of the Mekong's commercial fish catch migrate

long distances, which is critical to their life cycle. Dams block such migrations, leading to a reduction in fish stocks. The consequence is huge for Laos and Cambodia, where fishery and agricultural production from the Mekong River accounts for about 50% of their respective gross domestic products. SOURCE: [Manassinee Mattatarn, Marijke van Leeuwen, and Charlie Lancaster, " Mekong Lifeline", Southeast Asia Globe, December 2010](#)

## GARMENT FACTORIES



The garment industry continues to be a large contributor of exports and employment for Cambodia's economy. It represents approximately 90% of total export value and employs over 300,000 workers. 90% are woman. A garment factory workers makes on average 61 USD a month and 100 USD a month if she works over time.

SOURCE: [betterfactories.org](http://betterfactories.org)

## MIGRANT WORKERS



The Cambodian economy is predominantly agrarian, with agriculture employing 73 percent of its population (Asian Migrant Centre, 2002). Chronic poverty, landlessness, and natural disasters such as droughts and floods are compelling many rural Cambodians to migrate to other rural areas, the urban areas or neighbouring countries to seek work. Other push factors include

debts payments and a lack of viable livelihood options. The pull factors are the high demand for less skilled labourers in 3D jobs (dangerous, demanding, dirty) in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, the prospect of paid employment and a better life. SOURCE: [asiapacific.unwomen.org](http://asiapacific.unwomen.org)

## LAND AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS



Indigenous minority people in Cambodia are estimated to constitute 190,000 people, equivalent to 1.4% of the total population and have traditionally managed nearly 4 millions hectares of remote evergreen and dry deciduous forests. Economic Lands Concessions (ELCs) are viewed to be the biggest threat to the livelihoods of indigenous communities. By the end of

2010, approximately 1.7 million hectares of land has been formally granted as ELCs for large scale agro-industry purposes by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), which created multiple conflicts with communities, in particularly the indigenous peoples.

SOURCE: [Adhoc-Cambodia.org](http://Adhoc-Cambodia.org)

## THE FILMMAKERS

### **KALYANEE MAM (DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, & CINEMATOGRAPHER)**

Kalyanee was born in Battambang, Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge Regime. In 1979, she and her family fled the refugee camps at the Thai-Cambodian border and eventually immigrated to the United States. Even to this day her mother recounts stories of their flight. Kalyanee's father walked ahead of the family to protect them from land mines. They slept on pieces of plastic laid across the wet, jungle floor, while constantly evading soldiers pursuing them along the way. These stories and many others inspired Kalyanee to return to her native homeland for the first time in 1998, during the summer of her junior year at Yale University. And they continue to inspire her to make films about atrocities occurring in Cambodia even today. But she was not always a filmmaker. After graduating from UCLA Law School, she worked as a legal consultant in Mozambique and Iraq. In Mozambique, she discovered a passion for photography. In Iraq, she discovered a passion for advocacy on important contemporary issues. These two passions enabled her to direct, produce, and shoot her first documentary short *Between Earth & Sky* (co-director David Mendez) about Iraqi refugees. And eventually led her to work as Cinematographer, Associate Producer, and Researcher on the Oscar-winning documentary, *Inside Job* with director Charles Ferguson. Kalyanee hopes to continue to combine her passion for art and advocacy to tell both compelling and universal stories.

### **CHRIS BROWN (EDITOR & ASSOCIATE PRODUCER)**

San Francisco writer/director/editor Chris Brown has been making award-winning films for over a decade. His latest feature, *Fanny, Annie & Danny* (2010), has won 16 awards internationally. Hailed as "An indie masterpiece" by THE HUFFINGTON POST, *Fanny, Annie & Danny* was recently named a "Critics' Pick" by THE NEW YORK TIMES. Brown's previous films include *Daughters* ("Something as genuinely unpretentious as Chris Brown's debut feature seems an anomaly." – VARIETY), *Scared New World* ("Solidly in the tradition of pioneer indie pics like Cassavetes' 'Shadows.'" – VARIETY), *Battleship Contempkin* ("Gorgeous...you should check this film out if at all possible." – FILM THREAT), *Lost Cat* ("Defies categorization...hilarious." - SF CHRONICLE), *Office Furniture*, and the 2011 Bay Area Emmy award-winning documentary, *The Next Frontier*. By night, Chris is a singer/songwriter whose music has been heard on NPR, ABC and HBO. His debut album, *Now That You're Fed* was voted "One of the Top 10 albums of 2006" by a dozen music critics.

### **RATANAK LENG (PRODUCER)**

Ratanak Leng is a full-time staff member and Team Leader of the Film Project at The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). He has directed and produced two documentary films - *Victim Participation Through Filing Complaints to the ECCC* and *Living Documents*. Ratanak served as Assistant Producer for the documentary film, *Behind the Wall of S-21: Oral History from Toul Sleng Prison* and Research Assistant for the documentary short, *The Conscience of Nhem En*, which was shortlisted for the 2011 Academy Award for best short documentary film. Ratanak received a Bachelor's Degree of Arts in Media Management from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a Bachelor of Education in English from Norton University in Phnom Penh, and is now working towards a master's degree in the field of Peace and Politics at Kyung Hee University in South Korea.

### **DAVID MENDEZ (COMPOSER)**

David is noted for creating innovative electro-acoustic music that combines live instruments with the ambient sounds of electronic music. A guitarist of 20 years, David Mendez studied music at San Diego State University and is skilled in classical, rock, jazz, blues and ambient music. David has since worked as a sound designer, mixer, composer and recording engineer. David designed the complete original

score and sound for *The Greater Meaning of Water* (Sky Christopherson) and *My Brother's Arms* (Mark Barnett). He also composed the original score for *Mojado* (Angela Trevino), *Track by Track* (Anna Moot-Levin), and for documentary short *Between Earth & Sky*, which David also directed, produced, and shot. David also worked as location sound mixer for Oscar-winning documentary *INSIDE JOB*.

**YOUK CHHANG (EXECUTIVE PRODUCER)**

Youk Chhang is the Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) and a genocide survivor of the Khmer Rouge's "killing fields." He became DC-Cam's leader in 1995, when the Center was founded as a field office of Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program to conduct research, training and documentation relating to the Khmer Rouge regime. Youk continued to run the Center after its inception as an independent Cambodian NGO in 1997 and is currently building on DC-Cam's work to establish the Sleuk Rith Institute, a permanent hub for genocide studies in Asia, based in Phnom Penh. Youk is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Genocide, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights at Rutgers University-Newark. He is also the co-editor of *Cambodia's Hidden Scars: Trauma Psychology in the Wake of the Khmer Rouge* (2011) and the author of multiple articles and book chapters on Cambodia's quest for memory and justice. Youk received the Truman-Reagan Freedom Award from the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in Washington, DC in 2000. He was also named one of TIME magazine's "60 Asian heroes" in 2006 and one of the "Time 100" most influential people in the world in 2007 for his stand against impunity in Cambodia and elsewhere.

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## A River Changes Course

a film by  
KALYANEE MAM

**featuring**  
SARI MATH  
KHIEU MOK  
SAV SAMOURN  
SAVANN KEOUNG  
OMAR MATH  
OM MEY MATH  
AKAI MATH  
CHA SAMOURN  
YUN SAMOURN  
NOUNY MATH  
FARID MATH  
SALAAM MATH  
PESLES  
RAIM  
THIEU  
UM VEY

**produced and directed by**  
KALYANEE MAM

**edited by**  
CHRIS BROWN

**cinematography by**  
KALYANEE MAM

**produced by**  
RATANAK LENG

**executive producer**  
YOUK CHHANG

**associate producer**  
CHRIS BROWN

**music by**  
DAVID MENDEZ

**produced in association with**  
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**with the support of**  
THE JEFFREY C. WALKER FAMILY FOUNDATION

**supervising sound editor and re-recording mixer**  
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**sound designer**  
ANGIE YESSON

**post production sound service by**  
SKYWALKER SOUND, A LUCASFILM LTD. COMPANY

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**sound recordist**

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CHAMEROUN PHANA

ROMAS PHANA

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THE STAFF AT DC-CAM, ROBERT DENHAM, JEFFREY WALKER  
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CHAN VICHET, UON CHHIN, DAVID PRED, BRIDGES ACROSS BORDERS  
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THE OAKLAND CAMBODIAN BUDDHIST TEMPLE, SIEN HUY, DAM CHANTHY  
YUK KAMSAN, SOM AT, DING PYAT, SOL PENG, SAROM EM, CANADIA  
JOSH NORTON, SHANE DOLLY, REGINA SOBEL

**additional music**

"Sre Ter Klang" or "Countryside but Strong"

lyrics by NOB CHANSETH PHEARUM, performed by AKAI MATH

"Phous Vhea Ler Pous" or "Snake Crawling on Stomach"

lyrics by HUN HENG, music by SOK REAKSA, performed by KHAT SOKHIM & SOKUN NISA

"Doung Chan Euy" or "Beloved Moon"

lyrics by ROS SEREYSOTHEA, performed by ROS SEREYSOTHEA

"Chevit Casikah" or "Life of a Farmer"

lyrics by TANG KEO, performed by TANG KEO

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for access and permission to produce and screen this film

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**DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF AKAI MATH (2000-2012)**

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