



# “WATER IS SOUL”

**INDIGENOUS WOMAN LEADERS  
IN WATER GOVERNANCE IN THE MEKONG**



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# INTRODUCTION

**“Women who depend on a river and its resources will have an identity that is likewise intertwined with the river.”**

## **The State of Knowledge: Women and Rivers in the Mekong Region.**

Women and girls represent over half of the Mekong region’s population. The Mekong River basin is one of the most important river basins in the world providing a home and livelihood to over 72 million people. The inter-dependencies between women, rivers and water, and the role of women in productive, reproductive, and care work within the family and community pose the question of whether enough attention is being paid to the inclusion and leadership of women and their game-changing role in water stewardship and river protection. The connection that Indigenous People particularly Indigenous women have for the rivers and the waters are such that it forms a significant part of their traditions, cultural practices, and ways of life.

The voices and experiences of Indigenous women, which are crucial for both the women's movement and the Indigenous Peoples' movement – are often not heard. This highlights the fact that Indigenous women are generally more marginalized, discriminated against, and disempowered in various aspects of their lives. It underscores the pressing need to enhance the capacity of Indigenous women and the organizations and institutions that represent them; to play active roles and leadership in all matters that affect them as both women and Indigenous peoples.

## **ABOUT THE PROFILE BOOK**

Representatives of Oxfam and the Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NIWA) and other First Nations representatives from Australia and New Zealand met in Stockholm, Sweden for the 2022 World Water Week. They spoke of their experiences and the key contribution that Indigenous People have made to water’s stewardship. They brought with them samples of water from their respective river basins signifying its importance and connection to life. The session Thousands of Years of Lessons: Raising the Voices of Indigenous Peoples provided a platform for Indigenous People to link their voices, share stories and developed actions that had led to the creation of this book.

The Indigenous Women Leaders in Water Governance Profile Book collates the life journey of thirteen Indigenous Women from Cambodia and Thailand. They are the stories of extraordinary Indigenous women leaders who strive to defend their rivers and water sources; their access to these resources; their culture and traditions; and their efforts to gain recognition of their leadership roles within their communities.

Story telling is a powerful method of preserving traditional knowledge and identity. With the rapid advancement of information technologies, there remains a great need to preserve Indigenous traditions, languages, and traditional ceremonies because if these are lost, Indigenous identity is lost. We hope that, through this Profile Book, the important Indigenous spiritual beliefs and ceremonial practices narrated and documented will contribute to living knowledge for this and the next generation of Indigenous leaders.

Oxfam’s Mekong Regional Water Governance Program through the Inclusion Project phase 2 focuses on promoting social inclusion, gender equality and women’s leadership in water resource management. This includes supports to Indigenous peoples, women’s right and feminist organizations to strengthen the capacity, voice, and agency of women at national, regional and global levels. Through the work of the Asia’s Indigenous Peoples Pact and the Network of Indigenous Women in Asia Indigenous Women are supported to access space and platforms; amplify their voices, and agency; and engage directly in decision making fora on water governance, and on environmental and climate resilience issues.



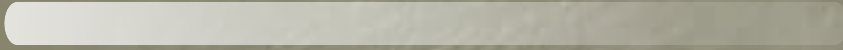
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# A STORY OF VERNG MANY, KREUNG INDIGENOUS WOMAN





# A YOUNG KREUNG WOMAN PROTECTS THE RIVER AND ADAPTS TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Verng Many, 28, is a single Kreung farmer from Tiem Leu Village in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia. She leads a community fishery team and works as an intern at the 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN), which protects the Sesan, Sreh Pok, and Sekong Rivers. She has been involved in fish canyon and water source conservation for many years. Her family stopped farming due to frequent floods and now grows rice, cassava, and cashew nuts on a farm two kilometers away from their home.

The Kreung ethnic group has a long history of living along the river, that provides water for farming and fishing. They fish in the Sesan River using nets, hooks, poles, and bamboo traps. Most of them reside in Vern Sai and O'Chum Districts of Ratanakiri Province, in villages such as Tiem Leu, Vorng, Veay, Khoun, and Pak Nam. This province is in the Northern part of Cambodia, bordered with Viet Nam. Two tributary rivers—Sesan and Sreh Pok—flow through central highland Vietnam into Cambodia (Ratanakiri and Stung Treng Provinces).



The Kreung ethnic group has a distinct culture of dress, language, and spirit offerings (locally called “Sen Pren Phum”). They hold a village ceremony every year and again every seven years at Neak Ta hut, a sacred place for their ancestors, with offerings of pigs, chickens, and homemade alcohol. All villagers join the ceremony to celebrate. The elders and chieftain decide the date of the ceremony and collect 5,000 Riel (roughly USD 1.25) or less from each family to buy a pig’s head for the offering. In the past, they used a whole pig, now a pig’s head and

a jar of alcohol made by the women are used. The ceremony is followed by celebrations with food and drink in the village hall.

A few years ago, someone cut down a kino tree (locally known as Thnong) at the Nek Ta hut, which was a sacred place for the Kreung. Nek Ta is a male spirit that’s said to live in kino trees. This was seen as a disrespect to the shrine and was believed to have caused sicknesses and deaths, mostly affecting children. The villagers responded with offerings for two or three years until the situation improved.

The sickness offering is a ritual that the patient performs to ask for healing from diseases. The patient consults a fortune teller who identifies the cause of the illness and prescribes the appropriate offerings, such as pigs, chickens, and distilled alcohol. The urgency of the offering depends on the severity of the patient’s condition. For example, when Many’s father suffered from serious hearing loss, her mother visited a fortune teller who told her that her father had offended the spirits by digging a hole in a sacred place. To appease the spirits, he had to offer a jar of distilled alcohol and a chicken at his home. The timing of the offering also depends on the availability of the villagers who participate in the ritual. Some ceremonies, such as soul-calling and village gratitude, take place in the morning, while others, such as lantern floating, happen in the evening.

The Kreung ethnic group, also known as Lun, has a distinctive language and culture that sets them apart from other Indigenous people in Cambodia. One of their cultural traits is that they avoid eating pumpkin, giant taro, giant gourami, and bantengs (Tunsong), because they believe these plants and animals helped their ancestors escape from a war. According to their legend, a man named Yak Run Diem (Grandpa Tiem) and his wife Yak Run Chan fled from their old home with their family when a war broke out. They crossed a river on the back of bantengs, but the bridge collapsed, and they were saved by giant gouramis. Then they hid from another group of enemies under pumpkin and giant taro leaves. They eventually settled in a new village, which they called Sruk Run Diem Peung (also known as Tiem Leu Village), where their descendants still live today.





To honor and thank the plants and animals that saved his life and his family's, Grandpa Tiem instructed the villagers to hold a ceremony every seven years. The last seven-year ceremony was held in 2020. In this ceremony, people offer two buffaloes (one black and one white), pigs, chicken, a jar of distilled alcohol, lanterns, cigarettes, betel, betel nut, and lime paste to the spirits of the items. Grandpa Tiem also told the villagers that they should never eat these plants and animals, because they were their benefactors. Grandpa Tiem became the hero and the leader of Tiem Leu Village, and his tradition has been followed ever since.

Grandpa Tiem warned the villagers that if they disobeyed his instructions and ate the plants and animals that helped them, they would suffer from sickness and misfortune. On the other hand, if they followed his instructions, they would prosper and succeed in life and war. The Kreung or Lun ethnic group has consistently kept this tradition of gratitude to their ancestors and respect for the plants and animals. If anyone breaks the rule and eats or brings these plants and animals into the village, they will be punished by having to make an offering and apologize at the Neak Ta hut. This serves as a deterrent and a way to maintain harmony in the village. However, in the last 50 years, the elders and leaders of Tiem Leu Village have reduced the number of offerings to ease the burden on villagers. For example, they now offer only one buffalo instead of two and hold the ceremony once every seven years.

The Lun ethnic group still resides in Tiem Leu Village, but some of them have moved to Siem Pang District in Stung Treng Province for work and education. They have formed a large community there and preserved their cultural identity as Lun people.

The Kreung dialect is used for daily communication within the family and the village, people switch to Khmer when they interact with other Cambodians or in formal settings. The Kreung or Lun language is still spoken by the younger generation, who learn it from their elders and relatives, as there is no written language.

"Water is vital for all living beings, including humans and animals. Water is needed for various daily activities, such as cooking, drinking, watering plants, washing clothes. Without water, people cannot live. Everyone needs water, whether they are Indigenous or not. The Kreung people rely on the river for their daily needs, such as bathing and drinking."

The community boils water before drinking it, and some have wells or pits to collect water. Those who live far from the river or who don't have wells have to dig pits to collect in both wet and dry seasons. The Kreung people call the small pits "Chrob" and the large pits "well". Another name for Chrob in O'Chum District is Dak Lung. Chrob are also used to irrigate rice fields. Their size and depth vary depending on the water availability. When there is more water, they dig wider but shallower pits; when there is less water, they dig deeper pits up to two meters to reach water. The two-meter-deep pits are called ponds. They avoid using pits that have bad smells or arsenic contamination. The water quality and clarity depend on the soil type: for clay, sandy, and gravel areas, the water will be clear; for soft and fine soil, the water will be muddy and not drinkable, but suitable for bathing. In the past, people used gourds to carry and store water; now, they use plastic containers or tanks.

In Tiem Leu, villagers face many problems with the river in different seasons. In the wet season, riverbank erosion causes the bank to collapse and damages crops, such as rice and cassava. In recent years, many cassava plantings have been flooded and ruined. In the dry season, the water level changes unpredictably because of hydropower dams. This makes it hard to grow crops along the riverbanks, as the community never knows when the water will rise or fall. The water quality also suffers from the erratic flow. Generally, the water is clear in January, but becomes muddy in May when the rain starts. The villagers use river water for drinking and bathing without any treatment. They also depend on the river for fishing, but fish are becoming scarce. In the past, they could catch enough fish to eat and sell; now, they barely catch enough for basic needs.

The villagers of Tiem Leu still suffer from the effects of the Yali Fall Hydropower Dam in Vietnam and the Lower Sesan II hydropower dam in Cambodia. When the Yali dam releases water and the Lower Sesan II dam holds water in the reservoir, the water level rises rapidly. The villagers now get notified beforehand by the village chief, who gets the information from radio and smartphone. This helps them prepare for the water gate opening. In the past, they did not have this information or any boats to move their food, crops, animals, and children to safe places. They faced many dangers and difficulties.







"In 2009, the water level rose so high that it reached the roof of a house," Many recalls. "I was 15 years old then. The only help we got was from an organization called Three S Rivers, which had some relatives working for the Sesan Association at the district level. They provided us with some boats, food supplies, mosquito nets, blankets, mats, and tents, but there were not enough for all the families. We were poor and had low rice production, so we did not have enough food."

Many is the third child among four siblings: two sisters and a brother—all married. At 28, Many has not considered marriage yet. This is unusual for a Kreung woman, who usually married young, sometimes at 15 to 18. Her father often scolds her when he is drunk. He says she is too old and should get married soon and have someone to support her and help with the farmwork. He worries about what will happen to her when he and her mother die.

Many has witnessed domestic violence, alcohol abuse, and gender-based violence mostly affecting women. Other disadvantages include unequal work distribution between men and women. Women experience domestic violence in their families. Many's father often drinks and verbally abuses her mother and her for being unmarried.

He has also physically assaulted her mother. Her mother had to run away to the village at night to escape him. Many feels angry and resentful towards her father for his actions.

She feels that other people do not understand her situation. They tell her to move out if she does not like her father, but she worries about her mother. Her father often gets drunk and picks fights with others, but he takes out his anger on her mother. He threatens to kill her, insults her, and destroys their belongings. He smashes dishes and throws away food. The local authorities and elders do not intervene because he has not physically harmed her mother yet. He keeps emotionally abusing her mother. Many feels ashamed and isolated. She does not trust anyone except herself. She sees that other people have happy families, but hers is not.

Many works for 3S Rivers Protection Network Organization and uses some of her salary for herself and some for her nephews and nieces. She buys them pens, books, and clothes. She has a message for the readers of her story. She urges the younger generation, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to join the efforts to protect the river. She says the river is their life source and without it they cannot survive.

She asks the project developers to think about the impact of their actions on the community rather than their own profits.

She also advises the younger generation to focus on education and social work instead of early marriage. She says learning is important for their future and their contribution to the nation and society. She says early marriage can limit their rights and freedom, their opportunities to showcase their talents and share their experiences, and their involvement in community work.

She does not consider herself highly educated, but she has changed a lot from being shy and afraid of others. Now she can talk to strangers even though she does not speak Khmer well and does not know English. She never imagined that she would travel abroad, but she had the chance to visit Thailand twice, to join a workshop on Women's Adaptation to Climate Change; and to be part of an exchange of experiences with Karen Indigenous women forest leaders on forest management. As a child, she dreamed of visiting Australia because she read a book and liked the name of the country. She dreams of going to France to see the Eiffel Tower. She is very proud of her opportunity to go to Thailand as a young Indigenous woman.

She began school when she was nine years old because she always clung to her mother and was afraid and shy. She had the opportunity to study because the Care Organization built a school in her village. She says, "Without Care Organization, I would not have the future I have today!"

She has gained more confidence and courage since she became a volunteer of 3S Rivers Protection Network organization. She can speak up for herself and others. She wishes she could learn English so she could communicate with foreigners. But she does not know English, so she just smiles when she meets them.

As a young person, "I want to work with the village leaders and elders to learn and preserve the Indigenous Traditional dress. I want to set up women and youth groups in the village to weave indigenous fabrics. But I do not have enough money to buy yarn and cotton. I will raise funds to protect and maintain my traditional Kreung clothes," said Many.





**ជាកម្មវិធីអាយុជីវិតសំរាប់មនុស្សនិងសត្វ  
ទឹកគឺជាអាយុជីវិតសំរាប់មនុស្សនិងសត្វ**

**Water is life for humans and animals.**







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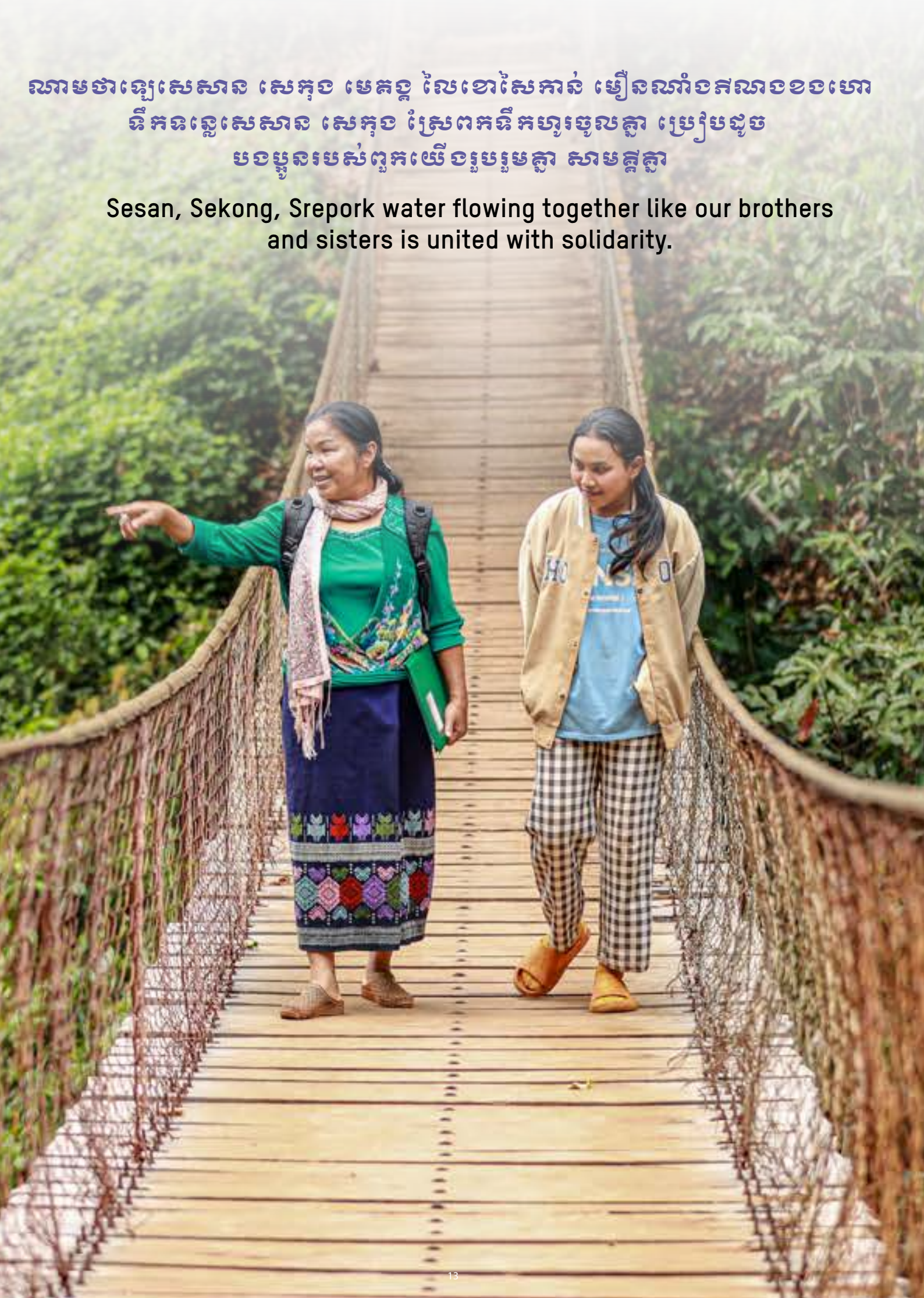
# A STORY OF NHUY NANG NOY, KHMER LAOTIAN WOMAN





ណាមថាឡើសេសាន សេកុង មេតឡ លែខោសែកាន់ មឿនណាំទកណាទខងហោ  
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Sesan, Sekong, Srepork water flowing together like our brothers  
and sisters is united with solidarity.





Nhuy Nang Noy, 55 years old, was born in Ratanakiri Province of Cambodian-Laotian ethnicity. The Vern Sai, Lumphat, and Kon Mom Districts of the Stung Treng Province, Cambodia, are home to most of the Khmer-Laotian minority. Like the majority of Khmers, they practice Buddhism. Nang Noy is presently a resident of village 01, Kachanh commune, Banlung district, Ratanakiri Province. She is the mother of four married children.

Nang Noy taught fourth grade at a primary school in the Vern Sai District before joining 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN) in 2002 as a volunteer. Her border patrol police husband asked her to quit her job after they had two children, advising her to choose between her career and her family. Nang Noy decided to leave her position.

After leaving work, life was difficult, particularly when raising their children on a low income. Noy made the decision to return to work and to avoid being dominated by her husband. This decision resulted in the end of their marriage. Following her divorce, Nang Noy raised her children supported by her own income.

In 2005 when 3SPN registered as an organization she was named a local coordinator in the Vern Sai District, Ratanakiri Province. Noy's primary responsibility at 3SPN is to establish direct contact with the grassroot communities. She worked to establish a local network in each area and to communicate with the villagers, while moving from village to village, to promote the organization's objectives.

Water has emerged as a significant local concern in her neighborhood. Villagers used to rely on the river for drinking and bathing. This is being replaced by wells due to declining water quality.

Nang Noy says, "One of our traditions with river is a boat race, which always takes place in November. Unfortunately, we are unable to celebrate this event because the water overflows the riverbank, and occasionally the water is completely dry. Since then, the river has flooded every year, which is unacceptable. Without irrigation systems, it is impossible to grow crops along riverbanks."

As she had always felt a connection to the river, Noy wanted to be a part of finding a solution so that the villagers could understand what was going on and how to fix it. "These unfavorable consequences are growing as a result of nearby countries' hydroelectric dams." The residents want to know details about what has to be done in the neighborhood and proposed development plans including the precise location where projects will be built and who will be investing in these developments.

Between 2016 and 2017, before the operation of the Lower Sesan 2 hydroelectric project, villagers had their thumbprints affixed to a joint petition, namely in the construction of hydroelectric dams in the country. They were stopped from going to Phnom Penh to present the petition by the authorities—who also seized documents. Noy enquired who had been responsible for the operation that had imprisoned a villager, and she made contact with others to request their help in getting the detainee released.

Information about the Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Dam is subject to restrictions by the authorities. People are not allowed to express their opinions, and there are threats to discourage them from leaving their thumbprints on paperwork relating to the Don Sahong Hydropower Dam. Police have called villagers in for questioning and have recorded thumbprints from documents.

Villagers who are willing to address raised concerns lack knowledge, particularly with regard to the law, which limits options available to them. Noy helped by setting up focal points and holding meetings to share experiences and expertise between districts.

In order to inspire the younger generation to learn about river protection, Nang Noy shares success stories of other people. "Elders have an important role in preserving rivers, but younger generations must also recognize the importance of rivers in people's lives and understand why we should preserve water."

The Sesan river has undergone significant changes over the past 20 years, including becoming shallower, a reduction in river resources,



poor water quality, drying up of some parts, leading to a change in the livelihoods and work of locals.

"I noticed that people in my community used to pay little attention to how crucial the river is to their daily life, but now they can see and understand the effects of the hydroelectric dam."

Noy's work resulted in the 59 village networks expanding to Sre Pok River in 2014, capacity building, opportunity to express opinions, strongly supporting local decision-making, planning, and arranging meetings with influential people are approaches she uses to bring people together to preserve the river and natural environment. "I hope my story could be learning experiences for the readers. As a woman, as a wife, I have no intention to win or lose in our relationship with my husband; but it is real life."







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# A STORY OF SRANG LANH, BUNONG INDIGENOUS WOMAN



ប្រះចារប្រះហាយ័វជាប្រះមួយ គឺថ្នាំនៃ ពុទ្ធយានិក ពុទ្ធនាក់ គភារិដ៏ ង  
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We cannot just have rice without water and vice versa.  
Rice and water are our life; rice and water spirit keep the children safe;  
we haven't done any evil acts, they did.



Srang Lanh, a 55-year-old Bunong Indigenous woman, lives in Kbal Romeas Village, Kbal Romeas Commune, Sesan District, Stung Treng Province, in the Northeast part of Cambodia. She is the mother of three children: a son, and two daughters. Lanh is known as the community representative for the 55 Bunong families in the Communal Land Registration process that her community has been working on to gain collective ownership of their traditional lands.

Bunong people are recognized by their traditions, customs, language, clothes, and spiritual forest and land ceremonies. They engage in upland farming and rotational farming, and they also raise buffalo, pigs, and chickens as well as gather non-timber forest products. Bunong's lives are organized around the farming season: families live together during the dry season, and they live apart during the wet and rainy season. Sometimes, parents reside and work in chamka—houses in the plantation fields, and their children may live in the village or vice versa. In the past, all the villagers gathered to celebrate the annual offering. On the east side of the riverbank, there were many trees, fruits, and flowers; people could catch fish, snails, and other resources for daily food.

The people continue to speak Bunong to family members and locals, and Khmer to outsiders. Bunong people have a strict commitment to their faith and traditions, which includes making a sacrifice. They have never ignored these offerings. They believe that to receive happiness, they must make the proper sacrifices. Otherwise, there will be illness and fatalities.

A watering ritual which involves water splashing, must be held if there is a prolonged drought. A pig, a chicken, and beer are sacrificed to the forest and mountain spirits in exchange for the rain, and the participants can enjoy the water's sprinkling during the festival.

A village curfew or abstinence of one to two weeks is implemented to manage and reduce any illness occurring in the village; residents are not allowed to leave the village and outsiders are not permitted during this time. If this rule is violated, residents are fined a jar of local alcohol and a chicken, which must be offered during the village abstinence period. Outsiders may visit with prior permission granted by the elders. In dedication to the spirit, they offer a pair of boiled chickens, juices, and a jar of alcohol to welcome those entering the village. If the villagers wish to go out, they must also advise the elders.

Old Kbal Romeas Village, where Lanh resides, is the homeland where her parents and grandparents have lived together for many generations. Her ancestors have settled here since 1920. The village is along the Srepok River, one of the three tributary rivers of the Mekong River in Stung Treng Province. A hydropower dam with generating capacity of 400 Megawatts was built on the confluence of Srepok and Sesan River in 2017. Villagers have struggled with management of homes and farmlands due to the dam operation. Five hectares of paddy land and 20 x 50-square-meters of household land was offered as compensation<sup>1</sup> for affected families to relocate to a new site. Fifty-five families of Old Kbal Romeas Village refused to accept the offer. They wish to maintain their collective lands. They consider the offered land to be the size of a frog or cricket pond.

Those who refused to take compensation in exchange for leaving the village have their homes and farms near the river, which is better for their way of life. They built completely new houses just four kilometers away from their hometown, so they can still feel a strong connection to their ancestors. In 2017 the same year as the Lower Sesan 2 hydropower dam operation, Lanh was chosen to

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<sup>1</sup> The Compensation package was a government inter-ministerial decision for families affected by the dam reservoir of LS2; Kbal Romeas villagers are among those affected by this.



represent the locals who objected to relocating to the new Kbal Romeas Village, which is situated along national road 78 and has no access directly to any river or source of water. She represents the voices of the villagers in disseminating and communicating with local authorities. Her stance is grounded in the opinion of her community.

“When my community is weak, I am weak. When my community is strong, I am strong. I cannot fight and shout alone without any support; it is impossible. So, villagers’ support is indispensable.”

Communal land titling registration is one of the major challenges for the Bunong Indigenous community. Forest clearance happened despite the fact that the Communal Land Title Registration process in the Kbal Romeas Village had not been completed.

Lanh notifies villagers of any meeting with provincial, district, and commune authorities and other stakeholders. She has always had other villagers accompany her to meetings to make discussions transparent to all villagers.

In a meeting with the Ministry of Interior officials in Phnom Penh, the Stung Treng Province official claimed that the villagers in Kbal Romeas collectively refused the land offered to them, which was between 900 and 1,000 hectares, and instead demanded between 8,000 and 9,000 hectares, despite the fact that the total area was only 7,800 hectares. Lanh expressed her concern:

“We are worried about losing land, spiritual forest land, sacred forest land, rice fields, wildlife sanctuaries, cattle ranch land, non-timber forest products, orchid trees, vines, and resin which are the sources of livelihood of the Bunong people. The villagers cannot harvest company products such as bananas and rubber despite the concession land having been granted to the company.”

After the collective struggle led by Lanh with her community, in 2019, the authorities did not force them to leave Kbal Romeas Village. Despite the offer of land and for homes to be built and the continuing risk of flooding Kbal Romeas, villagers continue on their traditional land with access to boats and wooden or bamboo rafts.





The second major challenge is the water in the dam reservoir. LS2 is the run-off river dam and when water fill the reservoir, Kbal Romeas Village is impacted. The reservoir water coupled with climate change causing impacts on the trees, the villagers' rice fields, ancestor burial sites, and other important forested area due to flooding for half the year during rainy season; the impact goes on to affect the water quality from part of Sre Pok and Sesan rivers, which are not as clean as they once were.

Due to poor water quality, villagers spend money on gasoline for hand tractors and engine boats to fetch water from the middle of the river. Many trees, orchids, homes, paddy fields, property, and ancestor graveyards have been submerged in the water for the last five years.

Lanh and local villagers have experienced intimidation from the local authorities for their resistance and the persistence in continuing to live in Kbal Romeas Village. Local authorities are not responsible for their well-being and life, and they are not under the Government's protection. Anyone who dared to protest was subjected to legal action. Despite her fears, Lanh continued to protest with hope for a fair future,

"In the past, our ancestors are able to defend the land without losing even a single meter. Now, we lost the land, forest, and natural resources in exchange for a company's land concession."





**“When my community is weak, I am weak. When my community is strong, I am strong.  
I cannot fight and shout alone without any support; it is impossible.  
So, villagers’ support is indispensable.”**







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# A STORY OF CHEUN SREYMOM, AN INDIGENOUS BUNONG WOMAN

ទាក់ទងនឹង ទឹក គឺជា ជីវិត របស់ មនុស្ស សត្វ  
ទឹកគឺជាជីវិតរបស់មនុស្សសត្វ

Water is life.





As there are no secondary or high schools in her commune, Sreymom completed her secondary education in Stung Treng provincial town in 2008. She majored in law while pursuing her undergraduate and graduate degrees in Phnom Penh between 2015 and 2019. Afterwards, she worked for the Cambodian Indigenous Peoples Organization (CIPO) as the Leader of the Women's Association since 2019.

The majority of the Bunong ethnic-minority group engage in rice farming, slash-and-burn farming, rotational farming, and farming with a variety of crops. In addition to farming, harvesting forest and forest by-products like vines and rattan, honey, and wild fruit is another source of income. The community catches fish from a local river for daily use and sells the surplus to traders to pay for their children's education, buy furniture, and to improve living conditions.

In the provinces of Mondulkiri, Stung Treng, and Kratie, Bunong people are widely dispersed. They are bilingual, using the Bunong language with family members, villagers, and also Khmer with other groups. Their traditional fabrics are still woven by hand and distinctive with blue and light green and these unique textiles are in high demand.

In 2012, the Lower Sesan 2 hydropower project was introduced in Sreymom's village, and the community began to worry about their livelihood. They were concerned about income generation activities, occupations, and their ancestral graveyards. The ancestral graveyards have enormous spiritual significance and there was deep concern about excavating and relocating this holy site, as in their entire existence, Bunong people never moved their ancestral graveyards. The community had never faced such a dilemma and had a need for appropriate offerings and rituals.

The community has persistently urged decision makers to pay attention to their concerns regarding the sacred of the ancestral burial site—to respect their land rights and cultural identity. During the inauguration ceremony of the Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Dam operation in 2018, the Cambodian Prime Minister issued an order to establish a community for villagers in the old Kbal Romeas village in the nearby area. This order

caused a change in the situation. Ahead of the inauguration, the tension built up, as the provincial government enforced the order to completely move the villagers in the dam reservoirs to the relocation site along the National Road 78. The community began holding meetings and having discussions about establishing the infrastructure and structure of their new community with local government. They often said that authorities said that development helps to conserve biodiversity and lessen the effects of climate change. Yet all around the community the resin trees are gone, submerged, and lifeless.

Many Indigenous people, particularly children, have minimal possibilities to study, acquire technical knowledge and skills, or finish higher education because of economic difficulties, discrimination, and lack of access to schools. It is important that the community changes their misperception and recognize the importance of education for their children. Without education, people struggle to change their lives because they lack a solid foundation on which to base their decisions, are fearful of making mistakes and venturing outside of their comfort zone.

People who do change may experience criticism from family and community; "As children of farmers, you won't need to study hard in higher education or any official position. As a woman, you won't need to study far away from home; you may have a boyfriend and get pregnant. As a woman, no one can accept you as a wife if you are well-educated." These perceptions discourage the younger generation, especially women—undermining the value of women and their contribution in society.

Sreymom wants to see women and young people have access to higher education, to be able to hold jobs and have the initiative to assist and better their communities, families, and selves. She encourages young people of Indigenous descent to never forget who they are: "develop and improve yourself consistently, even if you have to leave your community". She sought school and employment away from home; she has seen other young people pursue higher education and graduate, have successful careers and not give up on their studies.

Sreymom was inspired to study, work, and live apart from her family, saying, "First and foremost, self-determination and daring to challenge myself. I feel I can make a difference if I take such and only the critics seriously. Otherwise, I cannot improve myself. Second, although families encourage their kids to pursue higher education, materialism or other factors make it challenging for Indigenous youngsters to succeed in their endeavors. The community shall support and encourage young women to pursue their dream and education."

Sreymom wants to start a women's organization so that women's voices would be heard. She witnesses the difficulties women have faced, including domestic violence, abuse, stigma, discrimination, and lack of acknowledgement of women's abilities to perform a job. She chose to major in law because she wanted to learn about the laws and legal instruments that could protect Indigenous People's rights and interests and hold to account those who undermine individual and collective rights—including issues of land encroachment, citizen rights violations, and issues with economic land concession.

As there is a lack of skilled and competent human resources in the community, she wants to assist her people to have better lives. She serves the community by offering legal advice and consulting and gathering evidence to strengthen the voices of those who are disadvantaged. As these issues affect their ability to send their children to higher schools and for more lucrative employment prospects, the community should be able to discuss and make decisions on food security and economic standing.

Many obstacles prevent Indigenous women from attaining their life goals. Economic hardship and unfair and discriminatory criticism and lack of role models to inspire their journey. Despite frustration with critics, Sreymom believes "no one can stop us when there is a goal, even if it is tough to move forward".

Sreymom now sets an example for the younger generation to work hard in school, for the villagers to support their children in continuing their education, and to alter the perspectives of the village's elders. "Do not expect anyone else to help you but to stand on your feet and move forward; life is a struggle." Today, most children from ethnic communities study in Phnom Penh for higher education. However, their numbers are small, and even fewer for young women, but Sreymom's work and inspiration is helping to change this.







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# A STORY OF DOUNG CHANTREA, KUOY INDIGENOUS WOMAN

No River, No Life





Doung Chantrea is 30 years old and from a Kuoy ethnic minority group. She has two children and lives in Damre Village, Boeung Char Commune, Sambo District, Kratie Province. She is a farmer, growing crops along the riverbank and engaged in activities such as raising cows, chickens, planting bananas, oranges, and grapefruit. There are three villages on Koh Tnaot<sup>3</sup> (Tnaot Island): Damre Village, Kampong Rotes Village, and Koh Dambang.

Chantrea is a cashier of the Koh Tnoat Community Ecotourism Committee; a vice-chair of the agricultural cooperative; and a leader of the saving groups comprising 13 members. The saving group provides loans to members and collects interest to distribute dividends to the group. The newly developed Boeung Char agriculture cooperative consists of members from three villages with five board members. Shares are used as loans for all members, initiated and supported by an NGO, the Cambodia Rural Development Team (CRDT), and is registered for official recognition from the Provincial Department of Agriculture of Kratie.

Community Ecotourism provides homestays, food, accommodation, and transportation services, and a guide service to the waterfall for tourists visiting the area. Tourism provides income support to the community living on the island. Through the needs assessment conducted with villagers, CRDT organization provides toilets, chicken coops, pigs, water storage containers, and home vegetable gardens. Tourists visit the island during their holidays, and numbers vary from season to season. The Northeastern Rural Development (NRD) conducts training on vegetable cultivation, providing seeds and net houses.

Chantrea has been invited to speak at a radio talk show, Women on Air Program, and workshops on leadership. NRD trains the community on fisheries conservation and natural resources management, which has led to the elimination of illegal fishing activities in the area and an increase in fish catch for instant 3kg of black sharminow (Trey Ka-ek) per day.

Chantrea says the river is vital for people in her area as they rely heavily on water for daily use and farming. Without the river, there should be no life on the island.

“When I was young, there was plenty of water in the Mekong River without the emergence of any stone or rock on the water's surface. Nowadays, the water recedes to the bottom of the river, remains stagnant, with no flow currents, and most minor to the side of the cattle drinking plots, especially in the dry season from December to May.”

Chantrea highlights that deforestation and landslides along the riverbank cause shallow water. There was abundant water in 2015; this has declined in the last three years. Waterflow changes unpredictably, both receding and rising. When one walks across the river, one can see the colour change to dark green as a result of algae. This is not favorable for vegetable growers who face serious challenges, including losing their crops.

Chantrea wishes that she and the younger generation could speak and help to restore the Kuoy language, customs, and way of life. She hopes everyone can join hands to protect and conserve the river for the next generation. She wishes for reduced migration from the community, so people can remain with and live happily with their families, grow crops, raise animals, and take care of their children.

Harvesting forest products such as vine, rattan, hunting, and drinking stream water are part of the daily life of Kuoy people, a legacy from their great-grandparents. Their ancestors spoke the Kuoy language, but this is being lost for the current generation. Traditional houses and clothes of the Kuoy are still in use on Inta Chey Island, Boeung Char commune. Community based eco-tourism is assisting to protect and preserve traditions, culture, customs, and way of life of the Kuoy people. Chantrea has been compiling essential documents on the identity of the Kuoy people, including costumes, past way of life, and language to teach the younger generation.

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<sup>3</sup> Koh in Khmer language means 'island', and Tnoat in Khmer language refers to 'palm tree'.

# ទឹកត្រជាក់ ត្រីភ្លេង

## Cool water, plenty of fish.

This in turn means that if there is development in the community through the participation of relevant stakeholders, including leaders, authorities, NGOs, and people with a sense of responsibility and cooperation, villagers can choose not migrate to work elsewhere—they will instead live happily with their families in their traditional villages supported through business and income-generation activities.











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# A STORY OF KHAN CHANNATH, KOUY INDIGENOUS WOMAN

LOYAL TO THE PAST AND DREAM FOR THE FUTURE



Koh Tnaot island is located along the mighty Mekong River, home to a young Kouy woman: Khan Channath. At 24 years of age, she is a member of the Kuoy ethnic group and lives with her family in this small community located in Sambor District, Kratie Province of Cambodia.

Koh Tnaot is a beautiful island surrounded by Koh Kring to the north, Koh Prey to the east, Tamre to the south, and Ampil to the west. A total of 213 families (942 individuals, 49% female with 19 female-headed households), with diverse backgrounds, including Bunong, Kuoy, and Khmer, call this island home.

Life on Koh Tnaot revolves around farming, with villagers growing vegetables, raising chickens and cattle, and fishing. Channath is one of eight siblings, with four sisters and three brothers. She actively participates in farming, the fishing community, seasonal migration, and harvesting of cashew nuts and cassava. But Channath's passion extends beyond her work as a farmer and fisherwoman. She is deeply committed to supporting her community and protecting their community resources. As a community volunteer, she dedicates her time to safeguarding the fisheries, empowering women, and playing a vital role in the village's performance and dance group. The Kuoy ethnic group has a rich cultural heritage, and their performances included a blessing dance, a coconut shell dance, plantation clearing dance (Robam Chumreas Chamka), and Robam Rom Chanlos.

Living near the river means challenges for Channath and her community. Fluctuations in water levels due to climate change risk their crops, animals, plants, and health. Heavy downpours carry garbage polluting the water and harming local fauna and flora.

The release of water from upstream hydropower dams causes unpredictable water flow and changes the river's composition with algae and mud. Recognizing the importance of a clean environment and safe water sources, the villagers organized awareness-raising days to educate everyone on the harm caused by throwing garbage into the river. It was a joint effort involving teachers, students, and community members, young and old, and both men and women actively participating in clean-up campaigns to rid the riverbanks of rubbish.

Channath is passionate to see the younger generation more actively engaged in protecting their natural resources. She hopes that more young men and women will dare to protest, express their opinions, and embrace their roles as defenders of the rivers, forests, Irrawaddy dolphins, and the precious treasures of nature.

The encroachment of villagers onto community forest lands causes concerns for Channath. She witnesses the gradual loss of forests and fishery resources as in the past the community forest land was ample, but it is getting smaller and smaller. Channath believes that the women's empowerment is significant, and it is crucial for women to represent themselves, and be agents for change on the issue that impacts them, whether it is about domestic violence, alcohol abuse, financial support for families, and migration.

The Kuoy community understood the value that water held for their livelihoods and the ecosystem. All the residents relied on the water for daily activities like cooking and nurturing their crops. Not only was it a vital source of nourishment, but the river was also home of different biodiversity and included freshwater dolphins. These attractions held the potential to generate income through ecotourism that benefits her community. Channath urges the younger generation to join her in this sustainable endeavor. She recognized that with the decline in fish stocks due to population growth, illegal fishing practices and the rapid fluctuation of river flow, it was crucial to protect the river. She believes that by safeguarding the resources, future generations could witness the beauty of the Mighty Mekong River and experience the richness of their heritage and enable them to practice their culture that links to river.

In the past, the Kuoy Indigenous resided in Boeung Char Chas Leu Village. However, during the Pol Pot regime, Kuoy Indigenous were evacuated to live on an island. Despite their new surroundings, the community adapted and continued their way of life, relying on cultivating rice, crops, and fishing for their sustenance. Additionally, they produced Chanlos<sup>4</sup>. Language, rituals, and traditional attire formed the very essence of the Kuoy's identity.

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<sup>4</sup> a type of burning resin, use for lighting in the evenings at rural village where no electricity reaches it.





Among the ceremonious events they celebrated were Ascension Day (a day of gratitude to their ancestors), Poun Phnom Srov (a harvest gratitude festival), the River Festival, and other festivals that the Khmer celebrate, such as Khmer New Year, Pchum Ben. Channath participated in the river festival twice when she was young. She feels that nowadays, the villagers are not so united; they do not understand the benefits of the river, so they do not celebrate the river festival every year.

“In 2017, the River Festival was initiated by the Youth Network organization. The lanterns and rafts were prepared and floated along the Mekong River to extend gratitude for the river.

The Kouy Indigenous youth were active participants to ensure that their ancestral stories and traditions continued to flourish, and their need to protect the river so every generation would forever connect to their past.”

One of their primary rituals included an annual spirit and ancestor ceremony held in January. During this event, offerings of chicken, pig, noodles, and juices were presented to seek blessings from their forefathers. In the past, the celebration involved traditional music, drums, and elaborate spiritual attire. However, such practices have faded over time. The harvesting ceremony is held to commemorate the merit of rice, which is regarded as a mother of life; they celebrate through the donation of rice and have it stocked at the pagoda. This is mutual community support.

While she had grown up hearing stories from her elders about the days when her people lived in harmony with the land, and witness their spiritual and cultural practices, Channath and other young people in community try to revive the customs that had been lost over time. Deep within her heart, she felt a need to reconnect with the land and the river that had shaped her ancestors' lives and allow the next generation to connect to their roots.





**ជាកន្លែងមេតូចចាស់វិញក្នុង  
និរុត្តរជាតិ  
នៃកន្លែងមេតូច ជាមួយសម្រាប់វិញក  
មនុស្ស និរុត្តរជាតិ,**

**The Mekong is the mother human  
and living beings.**





**OXFAM**





# A STORY OF VENG SAROEUN, KUOY INDIGENOUS WOMAN





Veng Saroeun, 37 years old, an Indigenous Kuoy woman, a mother of four children, two boys and two girls. She is living in Koh Tnaot (Tnoat island) in Kampong Rotes Village, Boeung Char commune, Sambo District, Kratie Province. As a farmer, Saroeun cultivates rice in the rainy season and grows vegetables in the dry season. She was born in Ampil Village, Kampong Cham commune and moved to Boeung Char Village after getting married in 2005.

Saroeun started growing vegetables in 2007 with the technical support of two local organizations: the Cambodia Rural Development Team (CRDT) and Northeastern Rural Development (NRD). The support provided includes solar water pumping motors, seeds, and training in cultivation techniques. Through Oxfam's support, a toilet was constructed for her family.

Since 2010, Saroeun switched from cultivating vegetables on the riverbank of the Mekong River to the higher ground by using a pumping machine. She grows watermelons, beans, cucumbers, kale, and Chinese cabbage. She sells her harvest both retail and wholesale; the leftovers are processed into pickles. She processed cucumbers and cabbage pickles to sell in the village. Through such hard work, the family's living condition has improved.

Water is beneficial for animal life, farming, growing vegetables, cooking, and washing dishes, especially for people living along the river. If there is no river, there is no water; and life cannot be sustained. In recent years, the Mekong River conditions have changed due to climate change and hydropower dam construction; the water regime changes irregularly between the wet and dry seasons.

Seasonally, there is a two-to-three-day flood during the dry season that Saroeun's family experienced, and then it receded. The river dried up to the bottom during the dry season, where rocks and sand are formed, making it impossible to travel by boat. Saroeun thinks the immediate discharging of water from the hydropower dam was the reason for the changing condition in the Mekong River.

"I used to grow vegetables on the banks of the river in the dry season. However, when the water level rose, washing away the vegetables into the river. The changes in water level in the rainy season make it difficult to grow vegetables on the riverbank, so I decided to move the garden to the front yard of the house."

As a child growing up along the mainstream of the Mekong River, Saroeun witnessed freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins and plenty of big fish. Now only those few small fish could be caught. She thinks that illegal fishing gear practices are among the key reasons behind the loss of fish stock, species, and biodiversity. Saroeun sees that the use of pesticides and insecticides causes pollution and poor water quality; and landslides along the riverbanks are caused by cutting forests.

The Indigenous Kuoy live along the river and on the mainland. They grow rice, vegetables, and rotation crops, and they also fish and raise animals. They harvest and process by-forest products to generate income, such as producing Chambork and Chanlos (burning resin). The Kuoy people celebrate the harvesting gratitude (the mound of rice), the ascension ceremony of the grand-grandfather (spirit), the sickness offering, and the expulsion of demons and spirits from the village, the new year celebration. People always sacrifice and offer chickens and pigs to seek happiness or dispel horrible luck or misfortune. Pigs or chickens and locally crafted gifts are offered during the ascension ceremony. The harvesting gratitude is held in January at the SalaBon, a temple for religious gatherings, where people can donate or contribute milled or unmilled rice for the festival and celebrations. This practice demonstrates a culture where individual contribute toward the collective use of resources for the community, a strong practice among Indigenous People. The rice is stored in the pagoda, so those in need can borrow and access it. A sickness offering is prepared with a pair of chickens or a pig's head, depending on the condition of the disease. They offer the monks and elders food and drink along with local chanting and praying.





The demon- and spirit-chasing ritual is conducted with the preparation of small food and drink offerings placed on the rectangular board placed on the hand tractor traveling around the village. A pair of hung chickens are also devoted to praying for happiness.

A five-year-old boy is painted with a giant monster face to chase the demons and spirits out of the village. The villagers can donate either chickens or eggs upon passing by this parade. The rectangle board will then be floated in the river. V-neck blouses and skirts are for women; tied-end Sampot or folded skirts, and shirts are for men. These are the clothing identity of the Kuoy people. In the old days, grandparents could speak Kuoy, but most villagers do not commute in the Kouy language nowadays. There were Kuoy language teachers to teach the villagers in the last few years. The Kuoy people plucked the vines and resin to produce Chanlos (burning sticks). However, people are switching to using solar energy now. Abundant trees have been cut off, and only a few remain, such as Chheu Teal (*Dipterocarpus costatus*), bamboo, rattan, and resin tree used to paint boats.

Saroeun wishes the ethnicity, dialect, identity, traditions, and costumes of the indigenous Kuoy could be well preserved. The young generation shall protect and conserve the community forest. The Kuoy people continue to wear traditional clothes during important rituals or festivals. The next generation should neither cut down the forest nor use illegal fishing tools that destroy biodiversity and fish in the river. The community shall protect and promote tree replanting. Through the encroachment of villagers, fewer than ten species of community trees remain.



Sareoun performs the offering to the spirit before the team goes out to shot photos of the Mekong River's Kbal Kos where it is believed to be sacred place.







Saroeun has a key message for emphasize on the role of younger generation.

ក្មេងជំនាន់ក្រោយ គួរត្រូវថែរក្សាទឹក ធនធានធម្មជាតិ  
និងការពារព្រៃឈើអោយបានគង់វង្ស

The next generation to take care of and protect  
water, forest, and natural resources.





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**A STORY OF CHEA CHANTY,  
KUOY INDIGENOUS WOMAN**







## MY KUOY LANGUAGE IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

Chea Chanty was born into a Kuoy ethnic family, living with her eight siblings in Kampong Rotes Village, Boeung Char Commune, Sambo District, Kratie Province, Cambodia. Every day, Chanty does all the family farming, fishing, and raising cows and buffaloes. During harvests she works collecting cashew nuts and cassava. In addition, Chea is part of the Kuoy youth dance group. Whenever there were celebrations or rituals in the village, the group would be called upon to perform, and she could earn additional income through this performance.

Water plays a vital role in daily consumption, such as drinking, washing, bathing, and farming. It is crucial for humans, animals, and plants. Flood and water shortage posted a greater challenge to humans, animals, and plants. Flood damages roads and bridges, making it difficult to travel, causing poor water quality, and the declining of fish stock in the river. Chanty remembered when she was younger, she could catch up to four to five kilograms of fish each morning with a fish trap. But now, it was much harder to fish with the shallow water and many rocks in the river during the dry season.

Chanty wants to preserve the culture of her people and the environment. She urges the younger generation to clean and protect the environment in their surrounding school, streets, or river. The villagers shall participate in protecting fish refuges and natural resources, patrolling and conserving fish, protecting the community forest, and keeping it clean. Protect the community forest for the next generation, the resources that can be leveraged for ecotourism, celebrating rituals and village festivals.

Rituals, clothes, performances, and vine harvesting are the identities of the Kuoy ethnic minority, and Chanty wanted to protect these. She was worried about the Kuoy language going extinct, as the young generation no longer spoke it. To preserve the language, she encouraged the use of the Kuoy language in everyday life. The villagers included Chanty's family had lived in the highland area for generations, but in 1979, the victory of the Cambodian people over the genocide regime forced them to move to Koh Tnaot. Here, the villagers worked together to cultivate rice, raise animals, grow sesame, and various types of beans, and to do fishing.

Some of the rituals Kuoy people have always abided by are Ascension Day (Bon Leung Neak Ta), Village Festival, and Ancestor Festival, held in January. People offer chickens, pigs, rice, wine, desserts, and the slaughtering of cows and buffaloes to please the spirits in exchange for health and safety. Depending on the family's living conditions and affordability, the corpse can be cremated or buried. Village and ancestral festivals are devoted to the ancestors. The Kuoy people celebrate the traditional Khmer wedding in terms of clothes and dance. They also celebrate the river and sand festival by offering food to the monks, followed by dancing and other entertainment to commemorate the river. The message to the audience "Please forgive me if my speech or message is messy, incomplete, or wrong. Please provide constructive comments and justify accordingly. She warmly welcomes anyone who speaks or knows the Kuoy language, please kindly teach me and the young generation; we want to speak the Kuoy language".



**ជាកត្តាជីវិតសម្រាប់ក្មួយ  
និងជីវិតរបស់ក្មួយ**

**Water is the life of Kuoy ethnic minority.**







**OXFAM**





A woman with her hair pulled back, wearing a black and white patterned dress, a gold necklace with a red pendant, and red string bracelets. She is standing in a room decorated with colorful heart-shaped ornaments and white fringe. The background is dark and out of focus.

# **A STORY OF PHLOK SARETH, KOUY INDIGENOUS WOMAN**

**NEVER FORGET THE ROOTS**



Phlok Sareth, a 50-year-old Indigenous Kuoy, was not only a wife and a mother to five children but also a strong supporter of her community. Sareth led a busy and fulfilling life. Besides taking care of her family, she grows rice and upland crops, and raised animals. But her responsibilities had gone so far beyond the confinement of her home. She is the village chief assistant and a village health focal point, responsible for the well-being of women and children in her community.

In her role as a village chief, Sareth tirelessly works to address various issues that affected her community. She focuses on promoting health, education, hygiene, and sanitation. She plays a crucial role in ensuring student's enrollment, nutrition, and environmental protection. Her passion for her community led her to become the focal point for organizations such as the Northeastern Rural Development (NRD) and World Vision. Additionally, she serves as the secretary of the community fisheries and a representative for the women's network.

One of Sareth's major tasks is to collaborate with other community members to patrol and control illegal fishing practices. They work tirelessly to suppress, penalize, and confiscate unlawful fishing gear. Through their efforts, illicit boat fishing in the area has been brought under control, benefiting the lives and livelihoods of her community who were facing reduced catches due to illegal activity. Protecting the river and its natural resources is of utmost importance to Sareth. She collaborates with government agencies and relevant organizations to educate people about the importance of preserving the environment and not destroying the forest along the riverbank, which leads to devastating landslides. She actively participates in replanting campaigns to restore the forest.

The river is crucial for life; we cannot live without water. The ancestors could sustain their living by practicing crop rotation when they lived in the mountain and forests. During the dry season, it was difficult to access water; they needed to move to locate water sources, and there were no water jars at that time. People need to share the

water. They fetched the water and stored it in a weaving bamboo pot protected by resin. This container is called Krous, used to keep drinking water. While living on the island, water is beneficial for farming, growing vegetables, and raising animals in the dry and wet seasons; they have lived well by cultivating agricultural products.

"We could catch a lot of fish in our hometown at Boeung Char Village near Stung Treng Province. We caught fish using traditional gears such as fishhooks, cave refuge, bamboo traps, and drop-door traps (made of bamboo)."

The increasing population and the use of illegal tools, such as electric fishing rods and bombers, lead to a decline in natural resources. She hasn't spotted some fish species nowadays, such as ticking barb (locally called Trey Trasork, a fish species that lives in a deep pool on the Mekong), micronema fish, deep micronema fish (more than one meter long), and giant barb. The water regime did not change much in the last ten years.

There was abundant water in the rainy season and receding water in the dry season. Now things have changed. Plenty of water during the dry season destroys crops planted along the riverbanks. During June and July, the rainy season, the water receded to the river's bottom. The fluctuation seriously affects farming activities; we need a pumping machine to grow vegetables in the dry season. The soil is dried up compared to the riverbank soil; it evaporates quickly. Small-scale vegetable growers experience floods damages to their crops. There is a landslide during the rainy season at the upper stream of Kampong Cham commune. Several villagers' houses collapsed into the river. She believes climate change and water stock in the hydropower dam are the stories behind this. The government built schools when they first came to live on the island. They are educated, and most families send their children to school. However, only 30 percent of families send their daughters to school. Girls cannot pursue higher education like boys. They believe that the general Khmer are more knowledgeable than the Kuoy people. Our grand grandparents were able



to graduate only from primary education. Parents prefer not to send their children to higher education but to have them work in the fields and do business.

At Sareth's age, she was able to finish secondary education. Her parents could not afford higher education. Teachers were from other areas in the past, but now we have local teachers. Parents encourage children to study in a higher class. Her children have graduated from high school with suitable occupations: her first son works as a contracted teacher at a secondary school; the second son is a contracted teacher at a primary school; the third son is a financial officer at the commune office; the first daughter (her fourth child) finished Grade 11, and her fifth child is studying at Grade 5.

Initially, the Kuoy people lived in Boeung Char Commune, Sambo District Kratie Province, and shared borders to the west with Prey Lang of Kampong Thom. Our ancestors lived by the valley, along the river, in the forest, and drinking stream water. We do not live in one place; we practice nomadic agriculture, slash-and-burn rotation farms and change our settlement accordingly. We displace once every two to three years after returning to our hometown. Our ancestors lived in the mountains; they never settled in populated areas or along the river. However, after the victory over the Pol Pot regime, the government evacuated from Boeung Char, the guerilla stronghold, to live on Koh Tnaot, along the river.

Language, tradition, and customs are the identities of the Kuoy ethnic minority. The younger generation does not speak the language because the older generation did not teach them. Our ancestors thought that when we settled down with the Khmer people along the river, we would be subjected to stigmatization and discrimination as the Khmer people were more advanced and knowledgeable.

The existence of the Kuoy language in Kampong Rotes Village is almost extinct. Some people speak the language as being taught by knowledgeable students from other villages. People have celebrated the ascension ceremony (ancestor gratitude), harvesting gratitude, sickness offering and incarnation ritual every year. The ascension ceremony is celebrated to

commemorate and express appreciation for the old year and wishes for happiness in the coming new year. The chicken and pig heads are offered at the ancestor memorial hut. A memorial house exists in each village. Having observed the practice of the ancestors, the harvesting gratitude ceremony is held once a year. We do not know the exact intention of this festival. People contribute or donate rice as our grandparents practiced.

When people get sick, they practice incarnation rituals by seeking help from the medium. When patients recover from the disease, they must organize an offering to compensate the spirit or medium. Bay Sei, the decorated setting made from banana, betel leaf incense, and candle or locally crafted gifts, are prepared depending on the severity of the patient's illness; this usually consists of five or seven decorations of Bay Sei. They do not seek medical support as it has been exercised from their parents' age. V-neck blouse, long coats, and bun hairstyles are the identity of the women's dress.

Women cannot dismantle the bun hairstyle; the long hair represents the witch or demons' hair. Men's dress is composed of a long coat, a round neck shirt, and long pants. The Kuoy people respect sacred trees; they also celebrate the river festival. Villagers are grateful for the river; they participate in cleaning up the river and not disposing of garbage into the river. They manage by either burning or burying it.

Half of villagers are Kuoy ethnic minorities. We are half-blood Khmer-Kuoy, including her family (children). We do not hide our identity. Other people think that they can buy water, but water is everything. We cannot live without it; we are using water filters nowadays. We live in the forest, so we are very dependent on water. We celebrate the water festival, and holy trees worship.

"We urge the Kuoy villagers not to forget the Kuoy language; even if it is lost, we must preserve the traditions, customs, and religion. We did not possess any wealth in the past; however, we own a house, a motorbike, a car, and farmland; we shall never forget that we are the Indigenous Kuoy. I have never hidden my identity as a Kuoy;





Bay Sei- the decorated setting made from banana, betel leaf incense, and candle or locally crafted gifts.

when attending seminars or meetings, I always tell others I am a Kuoy. I wish that People living along the Mekong River join hands to protect and not destroy the environment of the Mekong River; we shall work to conserve the existing natural resources, not cut down the trees and participate in cleaning the environment (land and water) and to maintain such precious resources for the next generation."





**យើងគ្រូចថែរក្សាទីកន្លែងនាំអស់គ្នា។ យើងមិនគ្រូចបំផ្លាញ  
ឬបំពុលធនធានធម្មជាតិនៅក្នុងទន្លេមេគង្គ។  
យើងថែរក្សាទន្លេនាំអស់គ្នាដើម្បីគូនចៅជំនាន់ក្រោយ។  
យើងរួមគ្នាថែរក្សាទន្លេមេគង្គ ដើម្បីយូរអង្វែង។**

Join to protect the river together. We shall not destroy or pollute the natural resources  
in the Mekong River. Take care of the river for future generations.  
United for the long-lasting of the Mekong River.







**WHERE THERE IS WATER, THERE IS LIFE!**





# A STORY OF RINRADA SUTA, TRIBAL WOMEN'S NETWORK IN THAILAND

My name is Rinrada Suta. I am a headwoman of Ban Kok Community, Village No. 8, Chiang Klang Subdistrict, Chiang Klang District, Nan Province, Thailand. I am the representative of the tribal women's network in Thailand. My job is helping to develop communities and women's networks in gender equality and women's rights. In addition, I work to protect the rights of communities in natural resources and the environment (soil - water - forest) together with brothers and sisters of various tribes living in the forest, for the right to live on the lands of our ancestors. When we generate income without destroying the forest, we create a sustainable and balanced environment.

Water is essential for life, used for drinking, consumption, and agriculture. Water is also the habitat for aquatic animals. Where there is water there is life. Therefore, I place great importance on preserving the watershed forest, so that there is enough water for the people in the villages of the forest area.

People have lived in Ban Kok community for thousands of years. In June 1999, the government issued a law declaring Doi Phu Kha forest land a national park which overlaps with the arable and residential land in my village and nearby areas. This leaves us without ownership of land that has been inherited from our ancestors, and we have become illegal residents.

The challenge for me is: The community is located in a forest area where many laws are enforced. Both in public utilities, the fundamentals of land use of those laws lack fairness and legitimacy to the community. I think that in order to overcome it, it takes the unity of the people in the community. Understanding of one's own problems and the creation of a network of alliances to jointly solve problems.

The amendments to various laws issued by the state affect our way of life and the community. Rinnada would like to see equality being reflected in the government budget allocated to support the development of community living in the forest and outside the protected area. This call is a result of Rinnada's community not receiving enough funding if compared to the Thai community, where the government provides the full budget for development. The community wish to see the government focus on the tribal groups in the following forest areas:

สิ่งที่ต้องทำและอยากทำคือ การแก้ไขกฎหมายต่างๆ ที่ออกโดยรัฐที่มีผลกระทบต่อการใช้ชีวิตและวิถีชุมชน อยากเห็นความเท่าเทียมในการงบประมาณจากภาครัฐระหว่างประชาชนที่อยู่ในเขตป่าและนอกเขตป่า ต้องการให้รัฐบาลให้ความสำคัญกับกลุ่มชนเผ่าที่อยู่ในเขตป่าดังนี้

1. Policies and laws related to forest dwellers give communities the right to take care of and participate in the implementation of forest preservation policies.
2. Provide budget support to build the necessary infrastructure in forest communities.
3. Solve the problem of shortage of drinking water and drought in various communities.
4. Construction of water reservoirs near community areas in the near future.

Communities are affected in many ways. I want the Government to help and compensate fairly.

My advice for the next generation is "Water is essential for life." We should conserve the forest that is the source of water. Use water economically and know its value. Also be conscious and aware of your individuality. Have the courage to face problems preserving and inheriting our original identity.







**RICE IS LIFE; WATER IS THE SOUL**





# A STORY OF NORAERI THUNG MUANG THONG





The Pakayor Indigenous People make up the Ban Huai E Kang community. Located in the middle of a valley surrounded by mountains and forests, with a population of 588 people, they live together as a network of relatives relying on each other. There are two administrative structures for decision-making: at the community level, including culture, traditions, beliefs, self-government, and so on, and the other is a formal government through elections to work on improving the quality of life and infrastructure within the community.

### Our role in the community

People here depend on soil, water, and forest. We have a community area that we need to take care of: 10,000 rai, divided into six zones, such as residential areas, arable land, fruit orchard areas, shifting cultivation areas, usable forest areas, and conserved forest area. The community has common rules and regulations set during village community meetings. Many rules are strictly practiced, for example:

1. Do not rent and sell space to outsiders or investors.
2. Do not use all types of motorized sleds to cut wood in community areas.
3. Prohibit the cultivation of corn in the swidden farm plots.
4. Everyone must help pay taxes to the community 38 per person per year. Use the fund to take care of the forest, soil, and resources.

Noraeri Thungmuangthong is 48 years old; she is a farmer with two children: a son and a daughter. She is currently living in Chiang Mai. Noraeri finished 6th grade of elementary education from Ban Huai Tong School in 1989, and she graduated from secondary and high school in 1999 and 2002, respectively. Noraeri holds a bachelor's degree from Arsomsilp Institute Faculty of Liberal Arts in Social Entrepreneurship in 2017.

Noraeri has been engaged in a range of community development activities. In the past, she served as a Public Health Volunteer; a member of Subdistrict Administrative Organization; an assistant Village Headman; and the President of the Tribal Women's Network. At present, her community development's role is busier, including Village Headman, Moo1; President of the Indigenous Education Network; Vice President of Tribal Women's Network; Legal volunteer for Rural Women; member of the Committee of the Karen Network for Culture and Environment; Chairwoman of Natural Dye

Weaving Group, Che Su Mo, which includes her role as speaker and trainer for weaving and dyeing with the natural dyes. Noraeri serves as Chairwoman of the community committee. She is an activist and a defender of tribal rights.

Noraeri has deeply engaged in researching and documenting the importance of local knowledge and wisdom from her community—especially women's knowledge. In particular, she conducts:

- Research on the body of knowledge and wisdom of Pakayor women's cloth work. Of Tribal Women's Network of Thailand
- Research on Pakayor women and Climate Change Adaptation of Tribal Women's Network of Thailand
- Development of health service mechanisms for promoting well-being of ethnic women in Mae Wang District as a community interpreter

She is also active as a speaker and trainer for the Ethnic Women's Network of Thailand.

For Indigenous people, rice is life; water is soul. Our ancestors settled near the river which made it easier to feed the animals and grow crops. Water is our soul; there must be fertile soil for growing rice for rice is life. The areas that are characterized by fertile soil, water, forests are the preferred settlement. Women, like rivers, feed families. (Te Mop Ka) Water is used for women, mothers.

Our people live and stay in forest areas and rely on natural resources and the environment. We respect the supernatural, visible and invisible, and we believe that everything has ownership. We respect, believe, and live carefully. This means we receive from water and maintain it through rituals: Lei Ti, or prayers at the farm; Lei Paka, or prayers in the forest to preserve the forest that sustains us; and Lei Mei, prayers at the rotation farm that is also a way of respecting fire.

Unfortunately, in the past around 60 to 70 years, there are some laws that have disadvantaged indigenous communities. As indigenous people we have to fight against unfair laws and policies. We created tools for data collecting and documenting information from communities to confirm that we have been in these areas for a long time with our own history, legends, and stories to pass on for children and youth to be proud of their mother tongue and identity as Pakayor people.



We live on the forest floor, relying on natural resources, the environment, respecting the supernatural, both visible and invisible. We believe that everything in this world has an owner. So, we have to be careful. As we obtain from water, we must conserve water.

#### Indigenous Payakor Rituals:

- *Lai Ti — Respect the gods in the water of the field.*
- *Lap Ka — Respect the gods in the forest. If you get from the forest, you must conserve the forest.*
- *Li Mei — If you use fire, you must respect fire.*

What I want to do is create changes for Indigenous communities to maintain their way of life, culture, and good traditions to remain with us forever. But if the culture, beliefs, and structures are so inadequate that they make the other person feel inferior, we must help each other to find meaning and make corrections to equality. For instance, how could women and femininity, men and masculinity and people of different genders in tribal communities live happily together? How will young people be accepted by adults so that they can confidently pass on their knowledge and lead the next generation?

If we overlook the thinking of the new generation, it means that we don't have space for our children to grow up. But in creating a space to pass on, inherit, and develop the potential of a new generation, knowledge and wisdom can survive into the future. I only ask for space, opportunity, and potential development. Children and youth will have a strong foundation for growing up in community and society.





# FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHTS





# A STORY OF NAREE WONGSACHON





Originally, my lifestyle was simple. I love the sea as we make a living from the sea. I deeply respect nature and believe that humans are part of nature. I live with my family on an island in the Andaman Sea. During the pandemic, the restrictions caused people to live in fear and panic because COVID-19 was a new and unknown virus, and there were regulations and rules for travel, quarantine, and several steps were required for entering different area.

During COVID-19, the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation announced that our temporary shelters built for seasonal livelihoods would be demolished. This is very deplorable, as people were afraid of COVID-19, businesses were closed, tourism jobs were gone, resulting in unemployment. When people had no jobs, there was no money and no food. The only hope of the Chao Lay is the sea where we find food and subsistence. Instead, we were evicted from the areas that we used to make a living. Several families still live in the traditional way of moving back and forth to their temporary shelters—it is the circular way of the sea—and they were heavily affected.

I stood up to the threat to our temporary shelters and became one of the women who fight for the sea that is our living, fishing, and spiritual space. This fight is for all three Chao Lay groups of Urak Lawoi, Moken, and Moklen in five provinces of the Andaman coast: Phuket, Phang Nga, Krabi, Satun, and Ranong of Thailand.

I am from the Urak Lawoi on an Island in Krabi Province. The Island is called “Jum” or “Pulau Kajub” in Urak Lawoi language. There are three villages on Jum Island, and they are multicultural communities consisting of Urak Lawoi, Buddhist Thai, Muslim Thai, and Chinese Thai.

In the past, the Urak Lawoi lived a simple life. This way of life has been associated with the sea for hundreds of years, making a subsistence living from the islands and along the coast of the Andaman Sea. During the dry season—from November to April—when the sea is calm, the Urak Lawoi travel by rowing boat or “prahu ah-wai” to various islands. We chose to build temporary shelters, which are called “ba-ghad”, on the beach where there are abundant resources nearby. We depended on fishing and gathering resources both on land and at sea, in exchange for essential goods from onshore merchants. At present, the Urak Lawoi people have settled in a large community from Phuket to Krabi and Satun Provinces.

Our Urak Lawoi culture is based on nature and always depends on nature. Most of the Urak Lawoi have expertise in the sea and coastal areas. Therefore, the main occupation is small-scale fishing, and marine livelihoods are essential to survival.

“We love and respect both the sea and the land, and we learn to live in harmony with the surrounding nature; for example, we pay respect to nature and our ancestors. We have boat floating ceremony to drive away misfortunes, ritual of cleaning ancestors’ graves, ritual of paying respect to the sea or “pu ya lay”.

The problem faced by the Urak Lawoi is our lack of security in the lands and seas that we live, that we make a livelihood from, and perform rituals for. When the government has a policy to develop the country through tourism, then natural resource management is taken out of our hands. The area along the Andaman Sea has become a national park, conservation areas, environmental protection areas, and non-hunting areas. The areas where we make livelihoods have been decreasing and are becoming more limited. In several protected areas, we are prohibited from performing rituals according to our traditional beliefs. We are also prohibited from making a nomadic of the sea by building temporary shelters. Our knowledge of nature and traditional wisdom is disappearing. The necessity of making temporary shelters is not acknowledged or accepted, although these areas served as our fishing grounds, our travelling routes, our shelters from rough sea, and our outposts that help rescue others from marine dangers and disasters for generations.

Our Urak Lawoi’s weakness is that we have little knowledge of the laws. Many of us cannot read, cannot write, and lack knowledge of basic rights. This has caused us to be left behind—facing social inequality, oppression, and discrimination. Because of this situation, I had to quit paid work to join several networks to fight for our rights. These networks include organizations like Chumchon Thai Foundation, Indigenous Women Network of Thailand (IWNT), National Council of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand, Indigenous Media Network (IMN), and several other human rights organizations. In terms of academic activities, we joined Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.





Fighting for our rights is a task that takes time, since the problem involves multiple administrative and legal structures. The Government set up a Steering Committee on Revitalizing the Way of Life of the Chao Lay and Karen Ethnic Groups and the Committee also works on the setting and managing of culturally protected areas of the Chao Lay.

To solve these problems, I want the Government to push forward on the protection of the traditional ways of life of ethnic and Indigenous peoples. I also want the national development policies to be in line with ethnic and Indigenous cultures and to be truly participatory in real practice.



# PROTECT RIVERS, PROTECT FORESTS





# A STORY OF SAENGRAWEE SUWEERAKAN, SHAN INDIGENOUS WOMAN





Saengrawee Suweerakan, also called Saeng, belongs to the Tai Yai or Shan Indigenous group located near the upper Kok River in Shan State, Myanmar. She was born in Ban Mai Mock Jham, Mae Ai District, Chaing Mai, Thailand.

Shan people pass from generation to generation ways of living with forests and water. As a child, Saengrawee and her friends considered the Kok River as their classroom. They enjoyed swimming and finding natural herbs and wild fruits along the riverbank.

In addition, the Kok River is a central area that connects different Indigenous groups that share the river. There are approximately 16 different Indigenous communities living along this river. Until 1987, communities routinely connected with one another via boat, which are used primarily for business purposes.

Saengrawee recalls that Shan people have rituals related to the river, such as praying and making offerings to the Hua Nam spirit, floating Phra Upakut, to pay respect to the sacred river guardians. The ritual is held once a year. There are also festivals such as the Songkran and Poi Hang Nam Festivals, when Shan people like to pour water on each other to seek blessings.

For Indigenous people like Saengrawee whose livelihoods are built around and along the Kok River, the river is not just a physical feature; it is their entire life. "It's like sharing a story, blood, and life," says Saengrawee.

However, Saengrawee notices that some current human development projects are actively causing harm to rivers. There are roughly 30 sand mining companies operating along the Kok River and actively building their businesses. Most of the companies that impact communities are owned by local politicians. Sand from the Kok River is reportedly used in the major infrastructure development project that connects Thailand to China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

There is also a coal mining project along the river, operated by Thai and Burmese military companies. In this project area, some people were forced to relocate, so they fled to Thailand, as a result, they became illegal migrants.

"In my local area, some of us do not have land ownership documents. Some lost their land along the river. Some young people go to work in the city to earn income for their family, because they can't continue their life as farmers,"

On top of this, in her community, more than 50 percent of people do not have Thai citizenship. As a result, they cannot access the same basic rights as Thai citizens.

Witnessing the challenges that her community is facing, Saengrawee wants to be the voice for under-represented people.

Saengrawee has been working as a volunteer since 1991. She taught Shan language to children in her neighborhood. In 1999, Saengrawee joined the Shan Women's Action Network (SWN) to provide assistance to Shan people and other Indigenous groups who have fled Myanmar. Saengrawee organizes activities and forums that focus on understanding basic human rights for young people and women in her community. These activities include political situation updates with relevant organizations at the local, national, and international level, enabling greater understanding of the problems that her community is facing.

Recognized for her significant contribution to the community, in 2018, she was selected by SWN to join the Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand (IWNT) as a committee member. In 2020, she was selected from IWNT to join the Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NIWA) as a steering committee member. Supported by the Asia Indigenous People Pact (AIPP), the Network of Indigenous Women (NIWA) advocates for the rights and resources of Indigenous women in Asia.

Saengrawee's achievements do not stop there. In 2022, Saengrawee was selected to represent her community and became the first woman to share her experience of international dialogue and collaboration at World Water Week in Stockholm, Sweden.

In 2023, from March 20 to 24, she was a representative at the United Nations Water Conference, held in New York, USA. In the Pre-Summit event of Indigenous People under

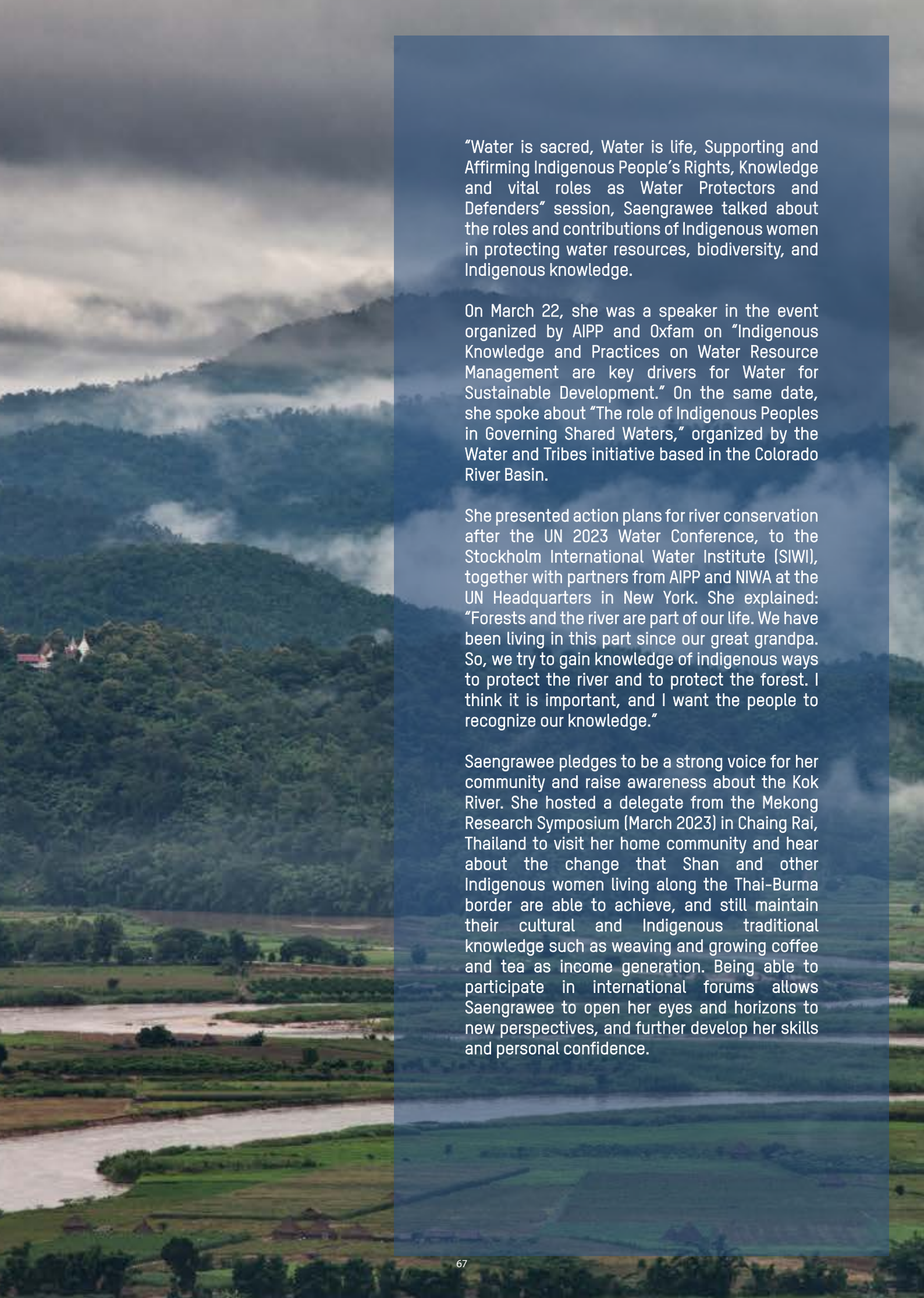




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Indigenous waters and forests are our life: 'protect rivers, protect forests' really means  
protect our people and other people's lives.





“Water is sacred, Water is life, Supporting and Affirming Indigenous People’s Rights, Knowledge and vital roles as Water Protectors and Defenders” session, Saengrawee talked about the roles and contributions of Indigenous women in protecting water resources, biodiversity, and Indigenous knowledge.

On March 22, she was a speaker in the event organized by AIPP and Oxfam on “Indigenous Knowledge and Practices on Water Resource Management are key drivers for Water for Sustainable Development.” On the same date, she spoke about “The role of Indigenous Peoples in Governing Shared Waters,” organized by the Water and Tribes initiative based in the Colorado River Basin.

She presented action plans for river conservation after the UN 2023 Water Conference, to the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), together with partners from AIPP and NIWA at the UN Headquarters in New York. She explained: “Forests and the river are part of our life. We have been living in this part since our great grandpa. So, we try to gain knowledge of indigenous ways to protect the river and to protect the forest. I think it is important, and I want the people to recognize our knowledge.”

Saengrawee pledges to be a strong voice for her community and raise awareness about the Kok River. She hosted a delegate from the Mekong Research Symposium (March 2023) in Chaing Rai, Thailand to visit her home community and hear about the change that Shan and other Indigenous women living along the Thai-Burma border are able to achieve, and still maintain their cultural and Indigenous traditional knowledge such as weaving and growing coffee and tea as income generation. Being able to participate in international forums allows Saengrawee to open her eyes and horizons to new perspectives, and further develop her skills and personal confidence.







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