

ASEAN-Australia BRIDGE School Partnerships Program
Using Stories for Cultural Understanding: First Nations Storytelling

Thach That Secondary School Viet Nam and Southbridge International
School Cambodia



The Guardian of the River

Long ago, in the Era of the First Currents, when the breath of gods stirred the river and the spirit world shimmered just beyond the veil, there lay a village called Phnom Sralanh, the Mountain of Love. Perched on misty cliffs near the Cambodia–Vietnam border, it was a place of reverence and rhythm, where banyan trees whispered ancient truths and waterfalls sang to the silver serpent of the Mekong River below.

The villagers lived in harmony with nature, guided by ancestral spirits and the sacred rites of the seasons. They honored the Mekong as a divine lifeline, its waters believed to carry the wisdom of Neang Mekhala, the river goddess. But now, the river's song has grown quiet. The sacred fish no longer danced at dawn. The forest spirits stirred with unease. It was then that Sovattheary arrived. Known in the celestial

realm as “Golden Grace,” Sovattheary was a guardian of the river's sacred balance, sent by Neang Mekhala to walk among mortals. She descended in the form of a serene healer, her silver-streaked hair flowing like moonlight, her eyes deep and fluid as the Mekong itself. Sometimes, she vanished into the jungle as a white-crested gibbon—a sacred creature in local lore—moving unseen through the canopy to listen to the land's whispers.

Phnom Sralanh welcomed her with cautious awe. Among those who greeted her was Channarak, a respected elder and trader whose charisma masked a burning ambition. Sovattheary, bound by her mission to observe and protect, began to sense the shifting tide.

Then came the omens.

A solar eclipse darkened the sky out of season.

The sacred trees shed blood-red leaves, staining the earth like a wound.

Deep in the jungle, an ancient stone gate—sealed for centuries—began to crack open. From its depths came whispers of forgotten power, echoing through the vines and mist.

And in the village, an old prophecy resurfaced:

“When the river’s guardian walks among us, beware the hand that offers gold with a serpent’s tongue.”

The villagers whispered it around their fires, their voices trembling with awe and fear. Sovattheary listened, her gaze drifting toward the Mekong, where the currents no longer danced.

The balance was tipping.

And the serpent had begun to speak.



The air was thick with the villagers’ murmurs of the prophecy. Questions started to spiral around the village. What could this mean? What could the prophecy be hinting at? Villagers started cautiously piecing together little clues left behind by past generations and inscriptions. Time passed as the haunting prophecy pervaded their minds, louder and deeper each time. Villagers became more reluctant of one another, curtains clattered shut, rumors echoed through the bustling streets. The once tranquil village became a mess. Tension began to escalate in the village, but the prophecy persisted, recalling them of the serpent.

Amid the hushed unrest, Channarak thought about the woman again, the presence that seemed to linger and possess around her that no one could acknowledge. “What an eccentric glow that woman has...” he pondered. “There must be a reason for this... she could not be human...” The thought dictated his brain for that day. Who was this woman? What was the reason for her visit? That evening, his conscience had an uneasy energy fueled by his growing curiosity.

From dusk to dawn, he scavenged for any script that could offer more context. His fingers rushed through the coarse sandscripts on the prospect to find what could explain her. Was she connected to the legend? Despite the languid weariness etched to his back, a smirk came over his expression, for he knew her powers. And he was willing to gain it under any circumstances. Although a trembling unease shriveled through his body, Channarak could not risk the sacred opportunity.

The following day came with the arrival of gentle pouring. Heavy gray clouds dripped over the little village. The air lingered with the fresh dew of the early morning and the subtle aroma of sacred energy. He spotted Sovattheary pacing near the river. A subtle chill tingled up his spine as the rhythm of his beat paced, but he could not let that interfere with his plan.

"My dear lady!" he called out. "It is raining. May I invite you to seek shelter? And...oh! You must be ravenous! You must come!" Stunned by the man's sudden warmth, yet grateful for the offer, she reluctantly followed him. As the gentle rain kissed the earth, Sovattheary followed Channarak through winding village paths. Each step felt heavier. A sense of skepticism jolted across her body, though she shrugged it off. "The people here are kind; they wouldn't try to take advantage," she reassured herself. The children, completely enchanted by the peaceful countenance and shining aura of the lady, were whispering about her from the doorways, saying she shined like the sun. Channarak's dwelling still had a somewhat secretive character, the very light smell of the incense still there, and old books with their titles faded away piled up on the shelves.

He welcomed her in with a courteous bow. "Please," he said softly, "make yourself at home."

Her response was polite, but what washed over her was still a slight uneasiness that she kept hidden away. No one noticed. His kindness, however, did not completely disperse in his eyes. Nevertheless, fatigue was her enemy and she did not want to fight over his impression.

For days, Channarak played the part of the gracious host flawlessly. He led her through lush rice paddies, introduced her to revered elders, and brought her sweet tamarind and warm stew. Each gesture chipped away at her guardedness. With time, Sovattheary began to speak more freely, even laughing gently when Channarak made lighthearted remarks. Yet in the dark, when she took a break, Channarak went back to his manuscripts. He studied pictures of heavenly families, charms penned in tongues used solely in dreams, and ancient predictions scratched on wood among the scrolls, one containing a line that validated every single suspicion.

From the river she comes, bearer of golden current. The silver within her veins will defy death, and the one who consumes it shall never rot or rust.

He ran his fingers across the line again and again, as if by touch alone he could begin the transformation.



Weeks passed. The village of Phnom Sralanh was no longer dancing under the skies kissed by the sun. The rain, that once upon a time calmed the earth, became bitter and unyielding. The harvest was a failure. And at night, the people in the village talked about the haunting sounds echoing from the woods. The old mothers held their beads tightly and murmured their prayers softly. The children stopped playing. At the Mekong banks, the water darkened to a strange, murky gray. The people grew afraid—hesitant about the prospect of the future.

Then one elder spoke what others had feared to speak aloud.

“The river goddess is ill. She mourns. She is among us... dying.”

The atmosphere was thick with the words of the speaker lingering. Incense smoke spiraled up to the ceiling, and the rain hitting the roof broke the following silence with a great sound. Every face turned towards Channarak. Their scholar, their healer, the one who had brought the quiet woman from the river’s edge into their midst.

“You’ve seen the water more closely than any of us,” said the headman, his voice low.

“What do you make of this?”

Channarak hesitated. He could feel their eyes glancing towards him, and the weight of their expectations burdening his shoulders. A sense of uneasiness shook through his body. The air felt weighted with hushed murmurs of hesitance.

“Perhaps,” he said carefully, aware of his words, “it is not the river that is ill... but something that has come with it. Sometimes the earth must sicken before it is healed.”

The villagers exchanged uneasy glances, yet none dared to ask more.

That night, the rain did not stop. It fell in steady, endless sheets, turning the paths to mud and drowning the droning of the cicadas. Channarak walked home through the storm, each drop of rain felt as guilt escaping from his mind.

Inside, the house was dim. Sovattheary slept beside the dying fire, her breath slow yet her silver streak hair still caught the faint glimmer of light. For a moment, he simply watched her—the way her presence seemed to push back the gloom, how the air itself shimmered faintly around her.

He could feel the pull again, curiosity, fear, and something deeper he dared not name. If she truly carried what he believed, if her very blood held the secret to life unending...

His hand twitched. The thought was a curse and a promise both.

A sudden gust tore through the shutters, scattering the flame into wild sparks. Sovattheary stirred, and Channarak froze. Her eyes fluttered open, unfocused, as if she were listening to something only she could hear.

“The Mekong,” she whispered faintly. “It’s crying...”

Then she slipped back into sleep, leaving him motionless in the half dark.

Channarak turned toward the window. Beyond it, the storm raged harder and the river’s roar deepened like a voice rising from the depths. He could almost feel it calling to him, beckoning; a summons wrapped in thunder.

Then, in that very moment, he knew the time for waiting was nearly over. Whatever was sleeping beneath the rain... would soon awaken.

The night passed, though at what seemed like an agonizing pace. The rain never softened, not even once. Suddenly, a clap of thunder jolted Sovattheary awake from

her deep slumber. She quickly drew herself into a tight ball, shivering from the downpour outside, with cold sweat dripping down her face. She turned and saw that the fire had already died out from the icy winds, with only soot and ash remaining.

Sovattheary pulled herself out of bed, but her head throbbed from the sudden movement, making her clutch her head in an attempt to make it go away. She threw the covers off herself, flinching from the freezing floorboards and made her way outside to collect some wood.

She opened the doors, greeted by a gust of wind. The atmosphere outside was turbulent. However, even with rain as harsh as it was, it felt almost quiet, as no one dared to step out in such weather. Quickly, she shut the door; it was far too fierce, too much out there. With nothing else to do, she stepped back inside. Sovattheary decided to stay in the common area for a while. The woman let out a soft sigh whilst gazing out at the situation outside.

“Oh my, what could you be doing up so early?” She heard a gentle voice from behind. The surprise was quickly washed away once she saw who it was, Channarak, since she was residing in his home for the time being; she felt almost a sense of comfort seeing the man.

“With skies so dark and downpour so harsh, how could one stay blissfully asleep?” she said with sorrow laced in her tone, as if she felt the skies’ sadness. Channarak observed her demeanor, he knew he could use her sorrow for his own benefit somehow. He leaned on the table she was sitting at and spoke an offer Sovattheary never thought she would hear. “I believe you can help, Theary. The saddened skies, the withering plants, the drought, it can all be better very soon.” Channarak wore a soothing smile as he spoke.

Sovattheary was bewildered, but she was intrigued; helping the nature around her felt like what she needed to do most at this moment. “Such a person like you has more than enough abilities to help, all you have to do is recite this chant. With your help, we can restore the village’s livelihood.” His words felt reassuring: “Just a chant this is, I shouldn’t back down,” she thought as she glanced at the manuscript the man had laid out for her.

With each word she recited, she felt lightheaded. Channarak, on the other hand, was enthusiastic as he watched her skin slightly glow, revealing the silver that lay in her. Now, he was just one step closer to the power he needed, to... immortality.



Days passed since Channarak was granted a fraction of Sovattheary’s powers. It was enough time for him to spread darkness—the rivers dried out, the sun no longer shone upon the land, with nothing but overcast skies and gloom. But it was also enough time for the girl to heal and discover the truth behind his true intentions.

She draped her shoulders with a cloak from a nearby coat hanger and pulled up the hood to shield herself from the storm outside, then made her way to the forest.

Following the fading remnants of his muddy footsteps, the trail eventually brought her to the Mekong, with Channarak there just as she suspected.

"So it was you!" she shouted accusingly, pointing a finger at him. He jumped at the sudden shriek and instinctively pulled out his knife at the potential threat.

"Sovattheary," he breathed, lowering his weapon. "I can explain."

"No!" she yelled, feeling hurt and betrayed. "It was all because of you that the people are suffering and the land is dying!"

"All because of me?" he pointed to himself, his tone hinting at arrogance and disbelief. "After all I have done to help you? You can't be serious."

"You manipulated me!" she argued, not backing down and walked closer to him.

"You tricked me into giving you my powers and for what?" Sovattheary cried out.

"Theary listen to me—" he replied sternly, stepping forward and making her step back.

"No," she cut him off, "you don't deserve my powers and I will take back what's mine."

Suddenly, he lunged forward with his knife, intentionally aiming for the heart. As a reflex, she pushed his hand away, only resulting in him stabbing her in the stomach instead. She fell to her knees, pressing her fingers to the wound, desperate to stop the bleeding.

Laughter erupted from Channarak's chest. "You thought it would be that easy to stop me?" he sneered between laughs, even clutching his belly. He dragged her weak body to the river and kept her submerged under the water in hopes of drowning her. Instead of fighting, Sovattheary chose to go with what Channarak was trying to do. Her blood mixed with the dark and murky river water.

In seconds, the ground shake beneath his feet, so he had to let his hands go off of the young woman to try and stabilize himself. The rumble became more violent, causing chaos and disorder throughout the entire village.

"Take cover! Quickly get inside!" the village chief scrambled, trying to help the locals get to safety and calm them down. In the midst of the chaos, he suddenly thought of the abrupt disaster and how strange it was. He looked into the distance at the forest and had a strong gut feeling it had something to do with the river. He pushed through the crowd and dashed for the forest.

One of the fishers noticed him going in the opposite direction of the crowd and latched onto his arm. "Chief! Where are you going?!"

"Don't worry about me!" the elder reassured the fisher. "Just help get the others to safety!" he gently gave the fisher a light push, signaling him to do as he said.

The ancient powers then seeped out of the cracking gate deep within the forest. A golden-like aura flowed in the sky as if it were a dragon. Anything that it touched

came back to life. Flowers bloomed, the sky cleared, finally letting sunlight shine onto the land. Trees stood straighter and taller, the water cleared up and was fresh to drink again.

“Yes! Yes! finally!” Channarak stood up, smiling in ecstasy. “I should thank you for being so naive.” The man looked down at her, and a short laugh came out as he stepped on her wound. Though it seemed to be the end for Sovattheary, she gave no reaction that satisfied him, only a smirk as she looked up at the wretched man.

Then it happened: a golden aura collected almost as a mist around her. It... healed her. Channarak was beyond confused. He lifted his foot off and cried out, “What! How could it be! This power is supposed to be MINE.” He shouted and complained, but Sovattheary didn’t bother to listen. The golden mist enveloped her, and once it dispersed, visible changes started to happen.

Scales were appearing, her hair was completely adorned with a shiny silver and not before long she started to resemble what could only be described as a dragon, a Naga.



Sovattheary, no longer cloaked in mortal form, rose from the Mekong as a radiant Naga, her silver-scaled body coiled with divine grace, her eyes glowing with the wisdom of ages. The golden mist that had healed her now pulsed through the land, awakening the slumbering spirits of Phnom Sralanh. The banyan trees bowed in reverence. The waterfalls, once silent, roared with joy. The Mekong surged with renewed life, its currents singing once more with the voice of Neang Mekhala.

Channarak, drenched and trembling, stumbled backward. His ambition had led him to the edge of divinity, but now he stood exposed—small, mortal, and broken. The power he had stolen had never been his to wield. It had rejected him, just as the river now did.

“You sought to possess what was meant to be protected,” Sovattheary said, her voice like thunder wrapped in silk. “You turned reverence into greed. And now, you must face the current you tried to dam.”



The river rose around him—not in fury, but in judgment. It did not drown him. Instead, it carried him away, far from the village, far from the sacred lands. Where he went, no one knew. Some say he wandered the jungles, cursed to hear the river’s

song but never drink its water. Others say he became a shadow, a warning told to children who forget to honor the spirits.

Back in Phnom Sralanh, the storm finally broke. The clouds parted, revealing a sky painted in hues of gold and rose. The villagers emerged from their refuge, blinking in the sunlight with faces lifted in awe. The crops began to sprout anew. The sacred fish returned to the river's edge, dancing once more at dawn. The banyan trees whispered again—not warnings, but blessings.

The village elder, who had followed the tremors to the river's edge, fell to his knees when he saw Sovattheary in her true form. "You are the guardian," he whispered. "The one the prophecy spoke of."

Sovattheary turned to him, her expression soft. "I was sent to protect, not to punish. But protection sometimes requires truth to rise like a flood."

She did not stay. Her duty was not to rule, but to restore. With a final glance at the village—at the children laughing again, at the elders offering prayers of gratitude—she slipped beneath the river's surface, her form dissolving into light and current. From that day forward, the Mekong shimmered with a silver hue at sunrise, a sign that she still watched, still listened.

The villagers rebuilt not just their homes, but their hearts. They planted new trees, sang old songs, and taught their children the true meaning of balance. No one should ever seek to control the river, but to live in rhythm with it.

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