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The Song of the Koun Lok (Cambodia)

The Song of the Koun Lok is adapted from the folktale about Cambodia's national bird as described by Penny Edwards and David Chandler's analyses about "Reuang Damnoek Kaun Lok" –the story of the origin of the child-of-the-world bird.

Characters:

Ma, *Mother*

Sophea, *eldest daughter*

Chamony, *middle daughter*

Peou, *youngest daughter*

Vireak, *Poacher*

Forest spirit, *dancer*

Scene 1 (*daughters sitting together chatting and laughing in the home*)

Ma

(*Ma enters with some vegetable*) Chamony, I'll finish cooking.

Chamony

The rice is almost ready. Sophea was telling us a funny story about a boy who ate his grandmother because she shrunk his pieces of meat when she cooked them.

Ma

(*laughs bitterly*) Please don't accuse me of shrinking the rice and eat me!

Chamony

But rice grows when you cook it! Fortunately, since we have so little.

Peou

(*Peou cries*) Peou hungry! (*they eat*)

Sophea

What are we going to do, mother? Father left us nothing.

Ma

Don't remind me of that useless man. Working himself to death...and for nothing.

Sophea

He was a kind father.

Ma

Don't get sentimental about him. He wasn't sentimental about you! Complaining all the time I didn't give him a son.

Vireak

(runs in) Quick! Hide me.

Ma

Go away!

Vireak

I'll give you money. *(he shows some bills)*

Sophea

There's no place to hide.

Ma

Give me! *(she takes money and rolls him in mat, then tells the girls)* Now, sit on it, and eat your rice.

Ma

(she goes to the door, talks to someone outside) A strange man? A poacher? I don't know anything about it. *(to Vireak)* They're gone.

Vireak

(Vireak crawls out and speaks on his iphone) I've escaped. Don't worry, the animals are safely hidden. *(puts phone away)* I'm lucky to be saved by a beautiful woman!

Ma

Beautiful? How can you call an old woman beset by troubles beautiful?

Sophea

So you're a poacher! Go away. What you do is not only illegal, it hurts the forest.

Chamony

Ma, send him away. He'll bring trouble to us.

Sophea

Ma, give him back the money.

Peou

(holds out her bowl) Food!

Vireak

I can see there's no man here. My poor lovely one, we can help each other. *(she smiles bashfully)*
Give me some rice.

Sophea

We don't have enough even for us.

Vireak

(a bird flies in. Chamony feeds it) What are you doing?

Chamony

Feeding our *sat daun ta*. (ancestral-birds, or birds carrying messages from ancestors)

Ma

Don't waste food.

Sophea

But mother, we've always...*(Ma puts more rice in Vireak's bowl)*

Black out

Scene 2 *(Vireak has moved in and also keeps wild animals in the back of the house)*

Chamony

I feel sorry for the animals he keeps here. I don't want to clean up after he kills them. It always smells of blood now.

Sophea

I hate him.

Chamony

Me too. He destroyed the *sat daun ta*'s nest for no reason. He'll bring bad luck.

Sophea

He is making Ma crazy, buying her jewelry and clothes. She doesn't think about us at all anymore.

Chamony

We could go to the police and report him.

Sophea

No, we can't now; he might get her into trouble. We have to think of a way to make him want to leave, or make Ma tell him to go.

Ma

(mother is dressed up, talking on iphone and admiring her ring, girls dressed in the same old clothes) Stop complaining. Don't you eat better now?

Sophea

We know he shouldn't have these animals.

Ma

They fetch a high price in the market, and even higher abroad.

Chamony

Why do rich people want to eat wild animals when they can easily buy pork, chicken and fish?

Ma

Vireak says they think it's more pure and fresh. Imported meat can be full of chemicals to make it look more delicious. You see how fast everything he catches sells.

Sophea

He'll get in trouble again.

Ma

No, the people eating it know it's not legal, and they're proving they're untouchable. Since he provides it to the 'right' people, he's also untouchable. Now everybody's happy.

Chamony

(whispers) Except us and the animals.

Sophea

(slyly to Ma) Actually, I meant trouble from a jealous husband. He sweet talks all the women at the market into buying the meat.

Ma

Sweet talk? All of them? Then it means nothing.

Sophea

Maybe, but he has a special relationship with Madame Chung.

Ma

That's just business. She buys for the foreign market.

Sophea

He goes to her house. They make a lot of money together.

Ma

(to herself) Maybe I should pay her a visit. *(to daughters)* I'm going to stroll around the market and pick up some mangos. You'll like that, won't you? Look after Peou and feed the animals. I'll be back soon. *(she takes off her ring, locks it up and leaves)* You don't know where it is, right? *(they nod. They play a game with Peou)*

Black out

Scene 3 (*in the house*)

Vireak

(enters, dressing) Have you cleaned up that muntjac? I'm going sell the meat and skin separately. And the bag of turtles. Also, tie up the pangolin. I'll take it as well.

Ma

(enters behind him) You'll need me to go with you to help carry them.

Vireak

No, I can manage. You stay here. You and the girls make sure the other animals have food and water. I'll sell the parrots and macaques to Madame Chung tomorrow. *(he leaves)*

Ma

Madame Chung? *(calls to girls)* He is seeing her! I know he still loves me, needs me. It's the girls. They're a burden to him. He knows they don't like him. Daughters, come, we're going out. I'm taking you to the pond—remember the pond where your father used to plant maize? Now I want you to plant the maize.

Sopheia

Is Vireak going to drive us?

Ma

Nonsense. We're walking there. *(they walk)*

Chamony

Oh, it's very far, how will we get back?

Ma

The same way. *(they walk in the traditional way of showing distance. The pond shows by lighting up shadow puppet screen)* My goodness! How the pond has shrunk!

Sopheia

It's only a puddle.

Ma

Its mud will still be fertile for growing. Now, here are the seeds, a bag of rice to cook, and matches to start a fire. Don't come back home until you harvested the maize.

Chamony

That will take a long time.

Ma

You'll have enough. Plenty of frogs, berries, crabs and fish. Just keep the fire going and you'll be fine.

Chamony

But what about tigers and bears?

Ma

Oh, don't worry about them. There are hardly any left, so it's much safer than before.

Sopheia

Thanks to Vireak.

Ma

(slaps her) Enough! *(leaves)*

Peou

(cries) Ma, don't go.

Chamony

She doesn't even care about the baby.

Sopheia

Never mind. You start the fire to cook the rice. I'll start sowing the seeds. *(they work)*

Chamony

This isn't so bad. We have fish and rice, and our own little hut. At least, no one hits us. *(they eat)*

Sopheia

It's too hot to work now. *(they sleep, Chamony wakes.)*

Chamony

What's that noise? An elephant? A tiger?

Peou

(cries.) Scared.

Chamony

Hush, Peou.

Sopheia

It sounds like a machine. They're cutting down trees.

Chamony

It's so loud.

Sopheia

Don't worry. They won't come here—there are no big trees left to cut.

Chamony

Oh no! The fire's gone out. How can we start it again? How can we eat?

Sophea

Don't worry. I have a plan. Get some dry grass. (*she pulls out a magnifying glass and focuses the sun on it*)

Chamony

What's that?

Sophea

I saw Vireak showing another poacher how to use it in the woods, and then I stole it.

Chamony

It's smoking. It's beginning to burn.

Sophea

The sun dries up the pond but it also supplies us with endless energy. Gather the twigs around the flame.

Chamony

As long as we have fire, we'll be all right.

Black out

Sophea

The maize is growing tall. It shouldn't be long before we can harvest it. Chamony, the fire has gone out again. Get more dry wood.

Chamony

There's no more wood close by, only this dry brush and grass. We have to go deeper into the forest.

Sophea

I'll start it up again. Where's the glass?

Chamony

I don't know. I thought you kept it.

Sophea

It was in my bag.

Chamony

Oh no, Peou was playing with the bag. Peou, did you take the glass?

Sophea

Her hands are all muddy. She might have dropped it in the pond.

Chamony
Bad Peou, naughty Peou. Now we'll never find it.

Sophea
Keep looking. Peou, where did you play with the glass?

Chamony
Oh, useless girl! (*Hits her*)

Sophea
Stop! It's not her fault.

Chamony
What'll we do now?

Sophea
I've caught a frog and three snails.

Chamony
We can't eat them raw!

Sophea
You will when you're hungry enough. Here Peou, chew on this.

Peou
(*chews and spits it out*) Hungry! Rice!

Chamony
(*tries to eat snail, spits it out*) Oh, I can't. We have to go home. Ma has plenty of food, and we only eat a little.

Sophea
No, she'll beat us, and might not give us anything.

Peou
Hungry. Not eat. Peou want home. Peou want Ma!

Sophea
All right, we have to go for Peou's sake
Black out.

Scene 4 (*at home, mother alone, drinking; her appearance is disheveled*)

Chamony
Ma, we're back.

Sophea

What's happened? Where's Uncle Vireak?

Ma

He was arrested. The police took everything away. He was the love of my life. If you've come back thinking you'll get a good dinner, forget it. There's nothing left. Now get out. You are the cause of all my problems. I wish you had never been born.

Sophea

Don't say that, Ma. We managed before he came; we can manage again.

Ma

There's no 'we' about it. I'm still lovely and will find another man, without you. No man wants to be burdened with so many useless mouths that aren't his.

Chamony

We're not useless. We work hard.

Ma

Your filthy clothes don't even cover your bodies decently. You disgrace me by coming here with your disgusting appearance. *(beats Sophea with a broom)*

Chamony

Stop Ma! *(mother beats Chamony; Peou cries and she beats Peou)*

Sophea

(grabs Peou) Chamony, run. Follow me. *(they run back into the forest)*

Black out

Scene 5 *(at the pond, they gradually become birds by using the shadow screen)*

Sophea

We have to stay here now.

Chamony

I don't mind anymore. It's peaceful.

Peou

Peou found spider. *(eats it)*

Chamony

Look, the maize should be ready to harvest soon.

Sophea

The pond is even smaller. It's almost all dried up.

Chamony

And it's still many months till rainy season.

Sophea

I've caught a crab. We can each eat a leg.

Chamony

If only we could boil it.

Sophea

It's not too bad. We'll just have to get used to it. *(looks at Peou)* Peou, did the spider bite you? Your mouth looks funny.

Chamony

Your mouth looks funny, too. Like you're sucking on a lemon.

Sophea

You're right. My lips feel stiff.

Peou

Peou too.

Chamony

(giggles) Mine feel like I'm kissing someone!

Sophea

Who'd want to kiss your rough lips! *(they make kissing noises at each other, and do a dance changing them into birds; they come out from behind the screen with bird masks)*

Chamony

My skin itches. I'm getting bumps all over. *(she pecks at the ground)* Look, an earthworm is right under us. *(she pulls out the worm)*

Sophea

(they pull and it splits in half) Delicious! *(their voices get higher and they sound like twittering birds)*

Chamony

The bumps are becoming feathers!

Sophea

My arms! They're turning into wings.

Chamony

There's a little fish. *(she bends down and grabs it with her mouth)*

Sophea

Good catch! Now watch me. *(she flies up and catches an insect)* Here, Peou, taste it.

Peou

Good. Tweet, tweet! A frog! *(she hops after it)* Mine! *(pecks with her mouth, drops it, chases it. The other two laugh at her)*

Chamony

Goodness! My belly is full for the first time in months.

Sophea

(she flies over to a tree) It's cool under the leaves. These little flowers are sweet.

Chamony

We don't need to bother with fire anymore. Everything tastes good just as it is.

Peou

(flying) Look at Peou! Peou flies!

Sophea

We're changed. And we're free. We can go anywhere.

Chamony

Yes, and we're happy. *(they sleep, with beaks tucked under their wings)*
Black out

Scene 6 *(by the pond)*

Chamony

(wakes up) What's that sound?

Ma

(calling them) Sophea, Chamony, little Peou, where are you? It's me, your Ma. Dear daughters, please come back. I was wrong. That terrible man tricked me.

Peou

Ma! Ma's crying.

Chamony

She wants us.

Sophea

Stay hidden.

Ma

Daughters, where are you? I'm sorry I hurt you. I'll be a good mother now. We can live by the pond together.

Chamony

She needs us.

Peou

Peou want Ma.

Sophea

No, little one. You cannot. It's too late—you've changed.

Chamony

Poor Ma. She sounds so pitiful. Can't we help her?

Sophea

Come, fly to the other side of the pond so we don't hear her.

Chamony

She's lost.

Ma

Daughters, I'm so hungry. All my food is gone. Daughters, where are you?

Sophea

She doesn't recognize us.

Peou

Ma not cry.

Chamony

She's stopped. No more sound.

Sophea

She would have eaten us. We're finally free.

Chamony

But our pond is dried up, and all the fish and frogs in it are dead. What do we do now?

Sophea

We'll go deeper into the forest, away from people. There will be fresh streams and lovely fruits to eat. The forest is our true home. Our suffering is finally over. *(they fly happily, and are suddenly caught into a net)*

Chamony

Sopheha, what's happened?

Peou

Big spider web. Peou sorry ate little spider.

Sopheha

(struggles) My beak isn't sharp enough to bite free.

Chamony

Let's pray to the forest guardian spirit to rescue us.

Peou

Pray!

Sopheha

The forest spirit can only protect us from wild animals, not people. *(spirit dances on the other side of the net)* Good-bye, dear sisters. A poacher like Vireak will find us to eat or sell. We may be the first to go, but if we're not saved, everything else will follow.

Chamony

The world grows silent. It's empty of the myriad things made by Indra. Soon, people will be caught in their own net.

Peou

Forest! Ma! *(shrill sounds of birds calling in distress; then silence as the three birds droop from the net)*

Black out

(The performers join in a final dance.)

The End