



B-side

ARTS & CULTURE

Moving the Mekong: An Interview with Kulikar Sotho and Anysay Keola

Transnational filmmaking and conversations on shared histories, geographies and environmental consciousness.

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Initially planned to be held in Ipoh, Malaysia—this year's SeaShorts Film Festival has moved onto a virtual platform and will be, for the first time, available to stream throughout Southeast Asia. From 12 to 20 September, and for a festival pass priced at USD\$10—catch the Official Selection of the SeaShorts competition, as well as collaborations with Kaohsiung Film Festival featuring migrant stories, moving image art from the Image Forum Festival, and attend masterclasses with leading film industry figures from the region. In collaboration with SeaShorts, B-Side peeks into the creative process of some of the festival's most exciting filmmakers.

"Other movements can offer solutions, but working with the film medium, I want to make audiences feel emotionally-driven," Lao filmmaker Anysay Keola—founder of the Lao New Wave Cinema, a collective at the frontline of developing a film industry in the country—says of his latest short film, "The Che Brother."

Thus, Anysay's action-packed story stages a dispute among siblings over selling their mother's profitable blood to a Western corporation pursuing an effective cure against a new disease. Indeed, the moving sight of an unconscious mother who lays on a hospital bed—in the hall of a large stony building, by the gushing Mekong—brings together spirituality, exploitation, and the ethics of consent in a single body. The other films in the anthology display this emotional edge too. Kulikar Sotho—the director of Cambodia's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars, *The Last Reel* (2014)—follows a couple and another man in *Soul River* as they move down the river, fighting to sell an Angkorian treasure they found, since the river no longer provides adequate means of survival. Both films are set in the short-term future, but their uncanny resemblance to the present gives us the sense that the future might already be here.



Still from "Soul River" (dir. Kulikar Sotho)

"To tell the story of man and nature is timeless, but it is even more important at this moment," Kulikar recalls how she heard of the irreversible effects of climate change from a series of seminars the **Mekong River Commission (MRC)** had organised for the five filmmakers. "How do you visualise a story that hasn't happened yet, but one that you can already feel coming?" Kulikar muses about the challenge of representing the unknown. The barren setting of her film is only a few steps away from the **predicted loss of one million tons of fish per year** estimated by the MRC due to dam developmental projects. Yet, more than the film's emotional resonance, a film anthology with an ambition to entertain and inspire crucially has to reckon with the question of its audience.

"After the premiere at Vientiane, I asked the producers for permission to screen the film on the pagoda grounds in the floating village where I shot 'Soul River,'" as she relates how those who live on the river bank continue to rely on the changing colour of a lizard's tale as a symbol of the changing climate. More knowledge-sharing and preparedness is required, Kulikar thinks, as she considers it her responsibility to bring the film to the communities that she had become so involved with throughout the shoot. For Anysay, however, he is interested in bringing this film to city-dwellers like himself who are only indirectly affected by the river's irreversible changes, who treat the Mekong "like scenery". The hero of the film, Xe, thus has to confront his own idealism—he holds on to Che Guevara's words: "Let the world change you and you can change the world"—as he returns from the city to the village."



Anysay Keola, Director of "The Che Brother"



Kulikar Sotho, Director of "Soul River"

Of course, the film has travelled well beyond the Mekong countries and made waves internationally—with Vietnamese filmmaker Pham Ngoc Lan's "The Unseen River" being screened at this year's Locarno Film Festival, and the anthology heading to festivals in Warsaw and Kota Kinabalu, and as the Opening Film for this year's SeaShorts Film Festival. While it is still early to make an assessment on its international reception, Pham emphasises in an interview on the making of the film that the anthology is "not just about the specific Mekong River, but the general river, every river".

The striking thing, as I speak to Kulikar and Anysay, is how environmental filmmaking increasingly requires that co-productions be a transnational effort. "Since we don't have a film industry in Laos yet, any film that is not written for local commercial release would need to rely mainly on international funds or grants," Anysay confesses, hinting that 'indie' topics, such as those related to climate change, require sources of support beyond the frame of cinematic nationalism. Reflecting on the significance of the film's release, Kulikar says that "every country on the Mekong River should make this film, and share a part in the storytelling of our common heritage". She wonders about the current absence and potential inclusion of stories by Chinese and Tibetan filmmakers, for example, since they too have a stake as the river runs through their land.

"[The film] touches the Mekong River Commission, it touches Oxfam, and I hope the film reaches audiences worldwide, because the subject matters to everyone, this generation and the next," Kulikar surmises. As ground-up and independent efforts at raising consciousness through environmental art grow in increasingly borderless ways, one can only hope that the efforts at transborder, regional, and global cooperation on environmental issues begin to reflect these changes in the cultural sphere. Unlike the hero of *The Che Brother*, the time for tempered idealism diminishes each day. Nevertheless, filmmakers continue telling stories in the hope that something, however minor, will begin to move.



Still from "The Che Brother" (dir. Anysay Keola)

The other two films that make up *MEKONG 2030* are "The Forgotten Voices of the Mekong" by Sai Naw Kham (Myanmar) and "The Line" by Anocha Suwichakornpong (Thailand).