

Hanuman and Sovann Macha (The Monkey and The Mermaid)
Toni Shapiro

The monkey general Hanuman was a very close aid of the Prince. When the Prince's lovely wife Sita was kidnapped and taken prisoner, the Prince asked Hanuman to help him rescue her.

Hanuman didn't hesitate. He called the monkey army together and devised a plan. First they would construct a bridge across the ocean. Then they would cross waters to the land where the Princess was being held, fight off her captors, and bring her safely home.

One-by-one, the monkeys started lifting heavy boulders, and placing them on the sea. They would heave one huge stone after the other, and put them all down close together to form a causeway. But, as they were working, they noticed something strange. After struggling to move a big stone into place, the monkeys turned around to get another boulder. When they returned with the next stone, the one they had just left had disappeared. This happened again and again, until, finally, they went to inform Hanuman, their leader.

How unusual, thought the monkey general. "Don't worry," he told the soldiers. "We'll get to the bottom of this." He ordered them to fly with him into the sea to try to discover what the problem might be. Down and down they swam until, from a distance, they noticed mermaids moving in the water. But the mermaids weren't just swimming. They were holding huge stones. In fact, it was these mermaids who were removing the monkey's boulders, and disrupting the progress of their bridge construction.

Slowly, the monkeys crept up on the mermaids. They swam around and around, trying to catch them. Off to the side Hanuman spotted Sovann Macha, the leader of the mermaids. He figured that if he could catch her, he could convince her to tell the others to stop destroying the bridge.

He tried to reach her without letting her see him. From the back, from the side, he attempted to grab her. But she kept swimming in her beautiful, graceful style, oblivious to his antics. Eventually, he knocked her down. She was not only surprised; she was angry. She swam away. He swam after her. He did somersaults and cartwheels; she kept her balance and never stopped moving.

But while they were involved in this struggle, Hanuman realized that he had fallen in love with Sovann Macha. So he tried to woo her rather than attack her. For her part, she eventually realized she shared his feelings. And she told the other mermaids to not only stop interfering with the monkey soldiers' work, but also to help them complete the bridge.

Thus, in the end, the Prince was able to cross the bridge with the monkey army, and rescue the Princess.

This story is an excerpt from the epic tale the Ramayana (with origins in India), known in Khmer as the Riemker. The dance of Hanuman and Sovann Macha is often performed on its own. It can also be one scene in the longer Riemker dance-drama.