



Life as a ASIA Fellow with CPCS

BY: CHONA R. ECHAVEZ, Ph.D.

“Nine months and a lifetime” are the words that I will describe of my stay in Cambodia. I have learned lessons and gained friends that will last a lifetime. The stars must have aligned or I must have done something right in my past life, or I have a great and mighty God that brought me to this country and specifically to the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS).

CPCS provided me with an enabling environment to learn more about the country and its people. It also brought the learning a notch higher to the level of reflection and dialogue in the arena of peace, peace building, and reconciliation. I hasten to say that the organization that an ASIA fellow is affiliated with is an important factor to make the entire course of a fellow’s stay meaningful.

For a number of months before my arrival in Phnom Penh, I have been trying to contact organizations to facilitate the conduct of my research. Then, lo and behold, the contacts were right at my fingertips. I was relieved to find out that they were just a call away. CPCS has its network of individuals and organizations working in the area of peace and reconciliation. Emma Leslie, the CPCS Director linked me to people. Our first meeting was the briefing and overview of my research and that of CPCS and then came the listing of individuals and organizations. As an affiliate, I got my own desk and enjoyed the same privilege as that of the CPCS staff. I had office supplies and a SIM card to connect me within and outside Cambodia. Furthermore, CPCS offered a rich cache of materials in its library as well as good way to start the interviews with the people connected to the place.



While in Cambodia, I enjoyed the best of both worlds – having my grounding with academic research (CPCS offers a Master’s Programme in Applied Conflict Transformation Studies and Peace Research Methodology Course) at the same time the wealth of experience that exists on the ground because I was with practitioners. From time to time, I could bounce my ideas and reflections with them.

While gathering data and in between my focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs), I had the chance to attend to skill building activities and workshops, namely Story telling as a Technique in Peace Research, and Healing Anxiety through Meditation (facilitated by John McDonnell, the author himself, and a Leadership Retreat, Leading from Within: A retreat for practitioners facilitating development). I also went to the 4th Peace Conference of Angkor 2009, attended by more than 200 participants, primarily youth who are working in the field of peace and reconciliation, together with their elders (teachers, district, commune and village leaders, villagers, achars, and monks from various provinces of Cambodia.

I am humbled and I bow with deep respect of the people who opened themselves and that of their organizations to me so that I can gather my data. I enjoyed such warm welcome to peoples’ hearth and homes as I go to the villages. They accepted me as I am, with no questions asked. I often make it a point to introduce myself and my project, but there were times when I got carried away. In the end after sharing their stories, people would ask me shyly, “What is this for?” I get flabbergasted for not having given my repertoire and I respond immediately with “Somto nah! (I’m very sorry!) And I go back to explain what my research is all about.



As to my research, children and young people are not usually perceived as key actors in the arena of decision-making and they are much less considered as peace builders. However, the young usually determines the success or failure of any development, specifically peace building initiatives in conflict and post-conflict areas. Cambodia has a young population. Of the 13.8 million people in the Kingdom, 38.8% are below the age 15, and 61% below the age 25 (Provisional Population Totals 2008).

Understanding young peoples' views, attitudes and conception of peace and unpeace, and the amount of time they invest on initiatives that contribute to peace building give us a view of how they use various avenues for engagement in development processes.

My study answers the following questions: How the youth in Cambodia (aged 14 to 27) conceptualize peace and unpeace? Do they live in peaceful communities? What is their vision of a peaceful country? Do they think that youth have a role in peace building? So far, what are the peace building activities that they have engaged in? What are their dreams and aspirations? Although the Cambodian youth of today have not witnessed the atrocities and civil wars that their elders experienced, it is interesting to note how the "conspiracy of silence" during and after the KR Regime influenced the dreams and aspirations of the youth as well as their concept of peace.

The youth have varied ideas and concepts of peace. They range from fulfillment of basic needs (access to good roads for them to be able to go to school and availability of jobs to have food on their table) to good governance and enjoying basic freedom (such as to be able to express themselves without fear of being sanctioned). For others, it is the absence of war and settling border disputes with neighboring countries while others emphasize "inner peace." It is interesting how the answers vary as one takes a closer look at their economic status and involvement in youth and peace organizations

The young dream big and aspire for more; however answers also vary as they are tempered with the present realities as well as their exposure to grounded programs and environment that nurture such dreams and aspirations.

The youth can be actively engaged in decision-making. They are the backbone of the society's human resource. Whether in the family, school or community, they can participate in the processes that have powerful impact in their lives. By doing so, they earn respect, exhibit leadership skills and shed the branding stereotypes that they cannot contribute to peace building and development and are mere troublemakers.

When exploring mechanisms to engage and educate youth effectively in peace building activities, it helps to develop grounded, relevant, and meaningful cross sector policies. We can use them as guiding principles for programs and projects that will be implemented by institutions and organizations, or by the youth themselves - for the bigger community and society. This way, the young could serve as actors of development and not mere targets of programs and projects as they unravel what happened in the past, to understand the present and chart a future with their elders.



As I reflect each day of my stay in this country, this comes to my mind. In this land of gentle people, Cambodia does not have a gentle past. For the past 50 years, its people have experienced violence. Up to this day, the process of healing continues. I was struck with their need to tell stories and the power of storytelling.

I thought that there is so much written and said about the Khmer peoples' past experience only to find out that the venue to talk in a climate of trust and confidence is still much needed. I read that so much tears have been

shed that they are bereft of tears, or that they have hardened their hearts from crying. But in the village dialogues, co-participants found and re-discovered that they can cry to empathize with what a neighbor, a friend, or a co-villager experienced. In the process, this has helped them to reflect upon the experience their elders. In turn, the avenue for healing and reconciliation is opened.

I would like to re-echo Fr. Tony de Castro's quote on Richard Kearney's point regarding the significance of narratives as Kearney examined Paul Ricoer's philosophy: "...we tell stories to realize our debt to the historical past, to respect the rival claims of memory and forgetfulness, to cultivate a notion of self-identity, and to persuade and evaluate action." Fr. de Castro adapted story telling to recount Mindanao as a Jesuit Frontier. True indeed, each one of us is a story and a story teller and for healing and reconciliation and bridging gaps between generations, storytelling is a powerful tool.

Away from my country, I have realized that I have a home away from home. There are differences but there are so many similarities. A significant Khmer celebration, the Pchum Ben is similar to the Philippines' All Souls' Day celebration. In as much as I was welcomed in the Cambodian homes, the monks welcomed me in their Wat. I have learned to drive a vehicle and become more disciplined in my yoga sessions. I am always mistaken to be a Cambodian national and people speak to me in Khmer. As the preface of Becker's (1998: xvi) book noted:

For despite their rulers and despite the travesties they have suffered from foreign nations, the Cambodians remain an unforgettable people, endowed with a culture that at its best is symbolized by the awesome yet sensitive beauty of the famous Angkor temples.

As Cambodians survived and can still smile in spite and despite of what happened... as young and old try to understand the past, confront present issues to positively shape the future, it is both a pleasure and a privilege to be mistaken as a Khmer or welcomed as a Filipino and a fellow Asian. Indeed, my stay in Cambodia is but nine months and a lifetime.

