



Shanti Sattler

This discussion between Shanti Sattler and Katherine Marshall took place on July 28, 2010 in Phnom Penh, and focused on the work and role of the International Center for Conciliation in Cambodia, where Ms. Sattler spent two years. In this interview, she discusses ICfC's approach to memories of history and to conflict, how it got started in Cambodia, and what the Cambodian experience has taught. She describes the work on village dialogues, highlighting the depth of remaining tensions and the need to work with each community. She also reflects on the verdict in the Extraordinary Tribunal, which had just announced the sentence on Commandant Duch, and on the reactions to it among those she had worked with. The discussion also explores how different conflict resolution approaches in Cambodia compare and how the work of different organizations is, and is not, linked.

"Hatred is a disease, and if not stopped or cured it will invade even more families, communities, and cities. Fanaticism prevails, eating away at the foundation of everything reasonable people have worked so hard to build. But now there are people on both sides who say: ENOUGH! Enough funerals, enough widows, enough tears, enough pain!"

- Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Laureate and Honorary Chairman of ICfC

Interview Conducted on July 28, 2010

How did you get involved in Cambodia?

I interned at the ICfC while I was a student at Tufts, and after graduation I moved to Cambodia to work on the program here. I spent a year full-time with ICfC, then another year in Cambodia, working for the American Friends Service Committee while continuing to assist ICfC. The past year I spent mostly in Central Mexico, but returned to Cambodia for one month both to witness the trial verdict for Duch, Commandant of the notorious prison Tuol Sleng, and to help with some transitions that are going on in the organization. My next step is to start graduate school.

What got you interested in this work in the first place?

Eureka, California, where I grew up, was a relatively homogenous community. In the 1980's, a community of Hmong refugees was relocated to the small town. I grew to become good friends with several Hmong children in my classes in elementary school and was always curious about them and the obvious differences in their lives at home and their cultural practices. Later, when I reached middle school and high school, racial and ethnic tensions began to surface among some of my classmates, especially those from Latin American countries. I received training in mediation and began to work with these students who were facing tensions. When starting college, I knew that I wanted to study international relations and peace and justice studies and began to take these courses. During one class I saw the film, *Long Night's Journey into Day*, and it made a lasting impression. I went on to work with the remarkable South African woman, Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, on her research with former combatants from the apartheid era, and also spent time in Northern Uganda, in Gulu, in 2007, where I focused on young people's perceptions of the traditional and international conflict resolution methods. I was hooked.

Can you describe how the ICfC works in Cambodia? How did it get started and what is the approach and philosophy?

ICfC is a small organization in Cambodia (its headquarters are in Boston). At present there are three Cambodians on the staff, and one Cambodian American. There are also volunteers. (Some information on the Cambodia program is at <http://www.centerforconciliation.org/Cambodia.htm>).

The first overtures to work in Cambodia came in 2004, prompted by the horrors of the Cambodian genocide and the slow and difficult process of bringing the perpetrators to justice and seeking reconciliation.

Adam Saltsman came to Cambodia in 2006 as an ICfC fellow to start the program here. He found many different programs and groups here that had tried to address the issues of reconciliation, but Adam's sense was that they were too much focused on large meetings, where large groups came together, but without real follow-up. They were having little impact in villages, where the real pain was still raw. Adam wanted to see a process that developed from the real needs of Khmer Rouge survivors, and one that was focused at the local level. ICfC opened its office here in 2007.

How did the process evolve?

The program and approach have evolved over time, changing as we have had feedback. It is supported and funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the German development agency DED (Andreas Selmeci is a good contact there).

The Center has an approach here that is quite unique. It involves intensive work at the village, community level, involving all the different groups that were affected by the Khmer Rouge period. It is worth remembering that everyone over 35 years-old was directly involved and has a story. Most people suffered and were victims, but many also were perpetrators in some fashion; in one village, for example, people recalled that Khmer Rouge returning home were killed outright by villagers even before they set foot in the village.

We work with local NGOs, and our first assessment periods last a week to ten days, working and living in the village. The dialogue starts with setting out and examining what happened, the social history of the community, and going through the memories in depth; it then focuses on meeting the social needs of the present. The participatory process helps to create new attitudes in the communities towards what has happened and to what sustainable peace means. It leaves behind some tangible steps and ideas. Visiting Phnom Penh to tour the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the Killing Fields and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal court, is one activity that villagers have chosen to help them heal from the past.

The selection of which villages to work in is done in partnership with local NGOs, and involves exploration and effort to find villages where there is something different, something distinctive regarding their history during the Khmer Rouge time. We have worked in about 11 villages over the years. Following the dialogues and activities, we stay in frequent touch with the villages.

The next step, which will begin next week, will bring together people from several different villages where we have worked, to engage in a collective dialogue exercise.

You highlight the roles of local NGOs, as the main intermediaries you work with. What kind of organizations are they and what is their status?

They come in many sorts and are registered and have formal status. There is, for example, a wonderful local NGO in Svay Rieng province that works in many areas of village development: health, human rights, agriculture and education. All of the organizations we work with give some space for people in villages to engage and participate.

What kind of evaluation do you do of your work? How do you judge success or lack of it?

We had a major evaluation exercise recently, with help from Nigel Field, Judith Strasser, and Michelle Balthazard. We did in-depth surveys in four of the villages where we work, as well as neighboring villages where we have not worked directly. The conclusion was that there were significant shifts in the sense of community cohesion following our work, and that villagers now show greater self-disclosure when discussing Khmer Rouge experience. The evaluation brought out a lot of testimonies as well.

We also worked together with the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization and the Khmer Institute for Democracy to create a wonderful film using our participatory methodology. The filmmakers stayed in the village where we work in Takeo province for several weeks and taught the villagers to use cameras to be able to make their own film about the Khmer Rouge regime. The process proved to be very successful, with many villagers taking part in the production and reflecting on the positive effects it had on their lives. (Check

out www.we-want-u-to-know.com for more information)

In this work, how have you seen religion come into the process?

Religion is part of everything. Our staff is Buddhist, but in the Cambodian context, culture and religion are tightly mixed, and in many respects culture comes before religion. And in a country where the great majority of people are Buddhist, there is very little sense of other approaches.

In working with Cham communities this has been an issue. The fact that there are differences that arise when people practice a different religion is not immediately obvious here. So when a Cham community needed Halal food during one of our projects, it was hard for our staff to even understand this need. The fact that different communities experienced different kinds of persecution under the Khmer Rouge is also hard for many to appreciate and accept. The Cham were persecuted differently, and they faced great suffering based in large part on their religious beliefs.

The Christians, and especially the Catholics, who were here in Cambodia around the time of the Khmer Rouge period, also experienced things differently. Because the Christian Churches preach more about forgiveness, the Catholic Church, especially, has welcomed some former Khmer Rouge, because they can be forgiven and accepted under the Christian belief. The approach in Buddhist communities regarding responsibility is different, and wrongdoers must live knowing they will face karma.

How much have you worked with monks in the villages where you have run programs?

Not very much, directly. There are so many different kinds of monks; some become monks for only a few days, some have the goal of learning English. Some are indeed engaged with religion primarily, but they see their roles as talking and teaching. We have rarely seen them in leading roles in the villages.

But even so, in the villages, the monks play central roles. They help facilitate a connection between the living and the dead. Sometimes people ask monks to come and pray when we are working in the villages or with villagers in Phnom Penh. When they give offerings to the monks, they are giving to their lost relatives, and this gives them a sense of peace.

We often bring people to visit Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, and they always invite monks to do a blessing ceremony in front of the stupa at the end of the visit to Choeung Ek.

And how do you see the relationship between religion and conflict, especially the conflicts in Cambodia?

Religion and conflict are more intertwined than some people realize. One of the principle goals of the Khmer Rouge was to destroy religion – every vestige of it: monks, the practices of the Cham, pagodas, churches, books, and teachings. This caused much suffering for the Buddhists, who could not practice and who lost rituals. A lot of pain was felt due to the loss of weddings and the ceremonies around them. Many were just forcibly married with no ceremonies, and do not forget what they missed and lost.

What kinds of tensions have you seen around religion? Any around Christianity?

Tensions among religious groups are not marked, nor are they central concerns in most places where we work. But they do occur, and because religion and culture are so deeply intertwined and embedded, religion can become part of many tensions and conflicts in religiously diverse communities around Cambodia.

We have not seen much overt tension with Christians, but that may be because of the areas where we work. The situation varies widely by village.

One promising situation I saw was in one village where there was a focus on the community space. A scheme was to allow community members to buy space for paintings on the walls as a fundraising mechanism. The one Christian family in the village did a painting with an image of Jesus, but also with traditionally Buddhist symbols in the background. It exemplified the degree to which the religious traditions can complement one another and exist in essentially the same space.

But broadly, there seems to be minimal understanding in some areas around Cambodia of what other traditions represent and what they are. There are real fears of missionaries and of conversion and that can

lead to feuds. In one village, a missionary approached a friend of mine and gave him a bible. The boy's father threw it into the river, angry with the missionary and with his son for accepting the bible.

This same friend moved away from his family and became a Christian, and is very sincere about his beliefs. He then fell in love, and married a girl who is a Buddhist, and their wedding was in line with her parents' wishes involving many Buddhist traditions. Talking to him at the wedding, I realized how much conflict this caused him; he said he knew that because his wedding was Buddhist, he fully expected that he would go to Hell, and that troubled him deeply.

How do ethnic and religious tensions and conflict interplay?

There are many conflicts today around ethnicity, especially with the Thai and the Vietnamese. This has become a greater focus for ICfC, as well as several other groups. There have been some conflicts in Cambodia due to religious beliefs and practices, but ICfC is not working directly with this.

What tensions do you see around conversion specifically? Have you encountered organizations where that is a central objective? Have you encountered Korean missionaries?

World Vision only allows non-Christian employees to advance to a certain level within the organization's employment structure. Some groups are here with conversion being a central objective of their work, notably the Mormons. The International Justice Mission is overtly Christian. But many of the Christian-affiliated organizations do good work and do not proselytize: Catholic Relief Services, Maryknoll, Church World Service, the Mennonites, and others.

We have not seen many Korean missionaries. They seem to tend to stick to their own communities.

What was the reaction to the Tribunal's recent verdict on Commandant Duch?

People were very disappointed. Paired with the seemingly light sentence (the remaining 19 years seemed ridiculously short) was the way the Court dealt with the question of reparations. This was particularly disappointing. People had not expected meaningful compensation (especially cash compensation), but they had hoped for more in the way of symbolic reparations, and the Court essentially ducked that issue, saying it was not in their jurisdiction and that they did not have money to dedicate to the cause. People had hoped for a memorial at Tuol Sleng honoring the people who were imprisoned there, and small memorials around the country. All the Court offered was to have the names of victims on the internet. According to one victim of Tuol Sleng, there are only 50,000 people with internet access in Cambodia, and when this person went onto the Court site found the name of his brother misspelled.

The general sense among the villagers we worked with was that the trial is taking a very long time and that it is very expensive. Some believe that it is too limited in its quest for justice and learning about what happened during the Khmer Rouge. That said, the Tribunal did help to generate discussion around Cambodia about the Khmer Rouge regime and that has some validity.

And at a deeper level, it raises the question of what forgiveness and reconciliation mean. For many, the first reaction to a mention of Duch is that they want vengeance, to torture him and pull out his fingernails, so that he suffers as people's relatives suffered. But when people calm down, their reactions tend to be different. To exact pain on him just perpetuates violence, just keeps it going. I have not heard a lot of talk about forgiveness compared to other post-conflict situations, but many people support Cambodia's denial of the death penalty and do not want him to be butchered.

There is solace in thinking about the next life, both for the victims, whose suffering and good deeds will be reflected in the next lives they lead, and for Duch: they believe he will face his bad karma in his next life. These beliefs bring some sense of peace.

I just saw the grandmother of one of the children I volunteer with at the center near here. She has suffered terribly over her life. She is an ethnic Vietnamese woman and lived in Cambodia in the '60s and early '70s. Near the beginning of the Khmer Rouge's period of complete control over Cambodia, the Vietnamese government, realizing that all of the Vietnamese in Cambodia were being killed, reached an agreement with the Khmer Rouge to give them salt in exchange for Vietnamese people. At the age of 18 she was transported away from Battambang province to Vietnam and saw the packages of salt coming the other way in exchange

for her life. She lost relatives both during the Khmer Rouge and after, suffered pain and moved from place to place. Her reflection was that she must have done something truly terrible in an earlier life.

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