

# **Establishing a Collaborative and Creative Approach to the Preservation of Genocide Clothing**

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## **I. Introduction**

The former Khmer Rouge torture site known as S-21 is now the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. Museum staff cares for significant material collections related to the Khmer Rouge period but textiles had historically been largely overlooked as a part of the Cambodian genocide record. The collection of clothing that includes garments worn by prisoners and Khmer Rouge cadre and guards, military paraphernalia, and other personal effects was found undocumented and degraded. This intervention was none too soon.

The pioneering project to preserve over 3,000 pieces of clothing was supported by the United States Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation in 2017-2018. This multifaceted project was designed with three distinct goals: to provide preventive and textile conservation training for Cambodian colleagues to enhance stewardship, to develop an inventory protocol and establish a textile archive, and to create a sustainable long-term storage system that mitigates threats from the tropical climate. The textile archive serves the mission of TSGM by furthering conservation and research and fostering professional exchanges for reconciliation and peace studies. This collaborative project initiated new avenues for continued conservation practice and collections care training in Cambodia.

## **II. Historical Context of TSGM and the Textile Collection**

Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is an emblematic site of memory for Cambodians and the global community. Between 1975 and 1979, more than 18,000 men, women and children passed through the former secondary school complex, known as Security Prison S-21, where they faced detention, torture and extermination at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (Democratic Kampuchea government) (ECCC Prosecution Office, Andrew Boyle, 2019; (Chandler, 1999). In January 1979, the transformation of the complex into a memorial and museum was initiated by Vietnamese and Cambodian forces. (Chandler, 1999; Hawk 1981). TSGM bears witness to the atrocities committed on its grounds through the preservation of the original buildings, instruments of torture, photographs of prisoners, archives of "confessions", (confessions were extracted by torture) (ECCC Boyle) and victim's clothing. Supported by UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme as an important part of Cambodia's heritage, the museum is one of the most visited cultural heritage sites in Phnom Penh, drawing more than 97,000 Cambodians and 423,000 foreigners in 2018 alone. (TSGM data) **(image 1)**



*In the early 1980's, Tuol Sleng served as a food distribution site, and many people came to find lost loved ones, by looking at the display of 'mug shots', and to collect rice. (photo TSGM Archives)*

The clothing in the collection was gathered from the complex and surrounding areas in the months that followed the fall of the Khmer Rouge. While the chronological history is not entirely known, primary sources and anecdotal evidence help to understand the history of the collection. Prisoners were usually stripped of their clothing upon arrival, after being photographed. Garments were scarce and valuable, and reuse and repurpose were common (Yathay, 1987, Him, 2001). There are graphic accounts of odorous clothing piles at S-21 when the Vietnamese army arrived, and two of the five child survivors of S-21 attribute their survival to hiding in piles of clothing (Chandler, 1999; Phal, 2018; P. EN, personal communication 2018). **(image 2)**



*Norng Chan Phal age 8, his little brother and three other children were found hiding in piles of discarded clothing in the kitchen building. One of the few remaining survivors from S-21, he has written a heart felt account, and sells his book at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. (photo from Documentation Centre)*

The clothing was used as a tool by the incoming command to illustrate the scale of mass genocide under the Khmer Rouge. Photographs likely taken in the 1979-1980 period show enormous piles in one of the classrooms, as well as 'cleaned' and organized garments hanging in a glass case (Hawk, 1981). A portion of the original display remains today, juxtaposed with black and white reproductions of prisoner's photographs. **(images 3, 4)**



*Piles of clothing characterized the first displays of clothing at TSGM in the early 1980's. By 2011, the display was reduced to two small glass vitrines showing a reduced pile and a few one-of-a-kind pieces of clothing. (photo from TSGM Archives)*

The context in which the clothing was collected and displayed provides a clear definition of its significance to Cambodian cultural identity as defined by survivors and founders of the museum and memorial. However, what was left of the textile collection faced rapid deterioration from mold, pests and other biological threats. Museum Director Mr. Visoth Chhay made it a priority to preserve the clothing through a partnership with the United States Embassy and embarked on a project to train museum staff in collections care.

### III. Defining the Significance of the Collection and Establishing Conservation Goals

The significance of the collection is defined by its materiality; these articles of clothing have survived to tell the stories of the Khmer Rouge when thousands of individuals did not. Collectively, these objects tell the broader story of S-21, while individually each item represents a piece of personal biography. Their preservation is vital for several reasons: to pay respect to and preserve the stories of those who suffered and died, to ensure that the lessons learned from this dark period of human history are not forgotten, and to provide resources for further research and peace studies. As Cambodia's Culture Minister Mr. Chheng Phon stated in the 1980's,

We have two stomachs, the upper for the soul, the lower for the body. When the upper is hungry the lower is also hungry. So every Khmer has to think about culture. To restore culture is to restore the people's soul that was damaged under Pol Pot. This is real survival (Hoskin & Hall, 1992).

(Images 4, 5)



*A hat with an embroidered name, and a little girl's playsuit testify to the humanity and intimacy of some of the clothing found at S-21. These are heart wrenching examples of 'witness bearing' material culture of Khmer Rouge Regime.*

Before hands-on work began, the guiding principles for how to address the clothing were defined with many stakeholders including survivors, historians, forensic scientists, TSGM's Director, conservators at Choeung Ek 'Killing Fields', archeological conservators, and local scholars (Garcia-Alonso, Lacombe, 2016-2018). The protocol was driven by the necessity of immediate triage and the emphasis from all stakeholders that all interaction with the collection must be guided by respect. Processing the clothing needed to retain as much contextual information as possible about individual components and the collection as a whole, and any intervention should not inhibit future access for research or other interpretive use. Collections care protocols needed to be suitable for the tropical climate and sustainable for long-term preservation despite limitations including unreliable electricity, inadequate access to conservation-grade materials, and limited staff to carry out the daily tasks associated with collection management. Western conservation practices

were adapted to work within the parameters of institutional restraints and to meet the needs of the collection.

The approach that was developed is similar to that of archaeological textile conservation, in which respect for the object and its cultural context are paramount and the path of least intervention is often selected to preserve as much information possible in the primary source object (Brooks, Lister, Eastop & Bennett, 1996). This approach also dictated that each piece of clothing was surface cleaned with gentle mechanical action only, as more invasive measures like wet cleaning had potential to remove information. Written and photographic documentation provide a record of the object, its condition, and observations about the information it may contain. **(images 6,7)**



*Teaching how to examine textiles and write accurate and descriptive condition reports is an essential part of establishing the Textile Archive. Objects are carefully vacuumed to remove surface soiling.*

#### IV. Conservation Training

The space dedicated to collections care at TSGM is located in one of the original school buildings, modified by the Khmer Rouge to detain and torture prisoners. This setting added a unique component to the preservation work. Converting the site of atrocities into a space for preserving the material objects that represent the memories of individuals served as a daily reminder that conservation is an act of reconciliation, remembrance, and healing.

On-site training and remote support over the course of twelve months addressed the project's primary goal: to deepen conservation and collections care knowledge in Cambodia and to provide textile preservation training to TSGM staff. Kho Chenda, Head of the Conservation Department, and three conservation trainees participated in twelve weeks of training that included lectures on handling collections, integrated pest management, and environmental monitoring. Preventive conservation was introduced and examined through the framework of the Canadian Conservation Institute's ten agents of deterioration and TSGM was used as a case study to identify risks, brainstorm, and implement options for mitigation. Training emphasized preventive actions that limit the risk of harm to artifacts, rather than complex interventive treatments that may interfere with the significance of the clothing as a document whose condition is part of its cultural value.

The curriculum of the training was tailored to the needs of the collection, the skill level of the participants, and the resources that were locally available. Textile conservation skills deemed essential based on the condition of the clothing and the established preservation goals, like hand stitching and surface cleaning with soft brushes and vacuums, were taught, demonstrated, and practiced. The training components directly supported the development of the protocol used to establish the textile archive. For example, object examination methods and bilingual terminology used to describe condition informed cataloguing, and clothing from the collection was examined as a group to demonstrate condition survey protocols for recording the inventory. Skills that were taught and practiced in the workshop were applied to processing the collection over the course of the year, first with guidance of workshop teaching staff and then with remote support via email and phone communication.

## V. Establishing the TSGM Textile Archive

The first phase of the project saw simultaneous preventive and textile conservation training and the development of a protocol for inventory and triage of the degraded collection. The textiles required a complete inventory to establish a well-defined archive and facilitate pathways for future research and interpretation of the collection. The following inventory protocol embraced the principles taught and practiced during the workshop.

1. Each object was assigned an inventory number using TSGM's numeric nomenclature system. The object was photographed with a digital camera, purchased with grant funding. The images serve as a visual record of condition before treatment.
2. Information about each object including condition and unique features like inscriptions was recorded on a hard copy 'long form'. The field headings are bilingual (English and Khmer), while the detailed object information is in Khmer. An abbreviated Microsoft Excel database was created to ensure easy access to the textile archive. As TSGM moves toward an institution-wide database for all artifacts, this digital database can be migrated to other programs.
3. Each object, often obscured by extreme soiling and imbedded insect and biological detritus, was surface cleaned with brushes and a variable speed vacuum. This resulted in greater legibility of each object, and extracted dirt was retained for future research.
4. Inventory numbers were written on cotton tape and hand-sewn to each object. After treatment photographs document conservation actions, resulting condition, and any significant features.

This process was completed for all 850 individual articles that were complete enough to be recognizable. As the inventory progressed, objects were rehoused in numbered boxes and locations were recorded in the database, making object recall possible. The portion of the collection composed of small textile fragments and plastics was batch-processed with a modified protocol that prioritized soil reduction and sifting through the pieces to identify unique artifacts. Though many of the pieces were unrecognizable, small objects such as toothbrushes, earrings, wallets, and historic fabric fragments were identified.

**(images 7, 8)**





*About one third of the collection are tiny fragments, which were sorted, sifted repeatedly, special items such as jewelry and small bags removed, and all the dirt retained for future research.*

## VI. Storing the TSGM Textile Archive

To fulfill the third goal of the project, the museum is field-testing a new controlled microclimate storage system that mitigates the effects of Cambodia's tropical climate on the collection. The system was developed by Rhino Research Group and adapted from the agriculture industry. Artifacts are placed into transparent polypropylene containers that include hygrometers to measure the interior relative humidity and temperature. Aluminum silicate zeolites known as "drying beads" are sealed in the containers with the collection material. The ceramic beads absorb water molecules, thus adjusting the relative humidity within the containers. The beads are removed when the desired relative humidity is reached, and the re-sealed boxes are able to maintain the desired interior conditions. The absorption capacity of the beads is easily regenerated in a locally purchased convection oven, and they can be reused indefinitely.

This protocol was tested and developed over the course of two onsite trainings, supported by Rhino Research's Thai expert, Ms. Patcharin Taridno. Return visits by the consultants throughout the year provided the opportunity to supplement training and make adjustments to the protocol.

**(image 9)**



*Visual reading of hygrometers from the outside of the box enables easy monitoring to maintain between 35-65% Rh for all 100 Dryboxes.*

## VII. Results of the Textile Preservation Project

The project and dedication of TSGM's textile conservation team established the textile archive. The project has also created a template for further textile conservation actions and clothing research. The guiding principles developed over the course of the project can be applied to other material culture collections, and the skills gained by TSGM staff will be

shared with other Cambodian cultural heritage specialists to enhance the care of textile heritage throughout the country. The project provided opportunities for cross training of museum staff and fostered relationships between TSGM departments.

This research has also brought much-needed attention to the clothing at TSGM. Conservator Kho Chenda provided informative presentations to museum staff and Cambodian Ministry of Culture personnel about the conservation of the textiles, the findings, and the importance of the training. She states,

the training was really enriching for all of us. I gained all the knowledge I need to preserve historical textiles and I would love to share my knowledge with others to make sure no evidence will get lost in the future.

Media attention has provided an outlet to share aspects of the project and the importance of preservation with the international community.

By the end of 2018, the TSGM textile conservation team completed the inventory, basic treatment, and rehousing of the entire collection. The largest group of mostly intact items includes trousers, shirts, caps, backpacks, kit bags, belts and shoes; at least one third of the objects are military-associated. Findings include dark shirts and green 'fatigue' military style that were standard 'uniform' for Khmer Rouge, along with water canteens, green canvas bags and signature 'Mao' caps. These materials support reports that prisoners were stripped of their clothing, except for shorts, upon arrival, and confirm the presence, military activity, and detention of Khmer Rouge at S-21 (Chandler 1999; Hawk 1981). Processing the fragments revealed several important examples of Cambodian material culture including handwritten notes, jewelry, pieces of silk, and textiles with identifying features. Seventy pieces of clothing and accessories include personal provenance like embroidered names or military data.

The inventory process provides a deeper understanding of the objects in the collection through careful examination and detailed written and photographic records. The names found on clothing can be cross-referenced with confessions, prisoner numbers and photos, and Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) Tribunal testimonies. These finds are extremely significant, and the potential for future research confirms the importance of the clothing as part of the overall archive of TSGM.

Future plans for the textile archive include making improvements to exhibits to expand public access and deepen the narrative of the Khmer Rouge period. Additional funding is being pursued to augment the display of the clothing. The next phase will focus on preservation of undocumented clothing that has been on display for decades and will provide supplemental conservation training. Additionally, the microclimate storage system may be employed for the long-term preservation of other materials in the TSGM collection, like metals, which suffer from returning rust. **(images 10, 11, 12)**



*Progression of storage conditions from pre 2015 (garbage bags) to open plastic crates, and the final storeroom in 2019 with proper shelving and Dryboxes.*

## VII. Conclusion

Clothing, in its simple familiarity, speaks undeniably to young Cambodians about the details of their culture even as it offers touchstones for those who survived that dark period in Cambodia's history. Over the course of this project, the previously undocumented collection has been inventoried, photographed, entered into a searchable database, surface cleaned, and stored in an innovative and sustainable climate controlled system. This clothing-focused research, coupled with the inventory and conservation project statistics, provides several important insights.

First, there is now a clearer picture of those who died at S-21. The preserved textile remains will foster new forms of dialogue with visitors, particularly Cambodians who visit TSGM to answer questions about loved ones, reconcile with the past, and further the movement toward peace.

Second, training and collaborative efforts have elevated the significance of the clothing collection and, by extension, Cambodian textile heritage for both the trainers and the trainees, and ultimately for the public. The conservation training engaged stakeholders and embraced respect for tangible material culture while promoting sustainable practice. The project adapted western conservation approaches and archeological practices to address Cambodian cultural heritage, institutional limitations, and challenges posed by the collection's poor condition.

Third, the resulting treatment protocol is unique to the conservation of degraded genocide textiles, which themselves represent thousands more victims of genocide and those who perpetrated it. The stains and soiling must be considered part of the textiles' provenance and evidentiary value. Specific limitations on how much to clean and how to stabilize have been developed in collaboration with the TGSM team and other heritage professionals.

This project showcased the importance of preservation, especially for sensitive organic materials susceptible to extreme climate. These clothes and the memoirs they symbolize are being treasured, studied, and cared for. Conservator Kho Chenda expressed the importance of preservation and its relationship to the museum's mission to educate about the horrific history of the Khmer Rouge in a 2018 Associated Press article:



If that clothing gets too old and worn out, then the evidence it offers will be gone, and when you talk to the younger generation, they will not believe you.

(images 13, 14)



*Explaining the protocols of textile conservation and the Drybead technology to visiting heritage experts and funders, and at a STEM Fair in Phnom Penh, help to elevate the status of the project and foster greater understanding of this important history.*

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