

## **ETHICAL FLEXIBILITY AND THE PRINCIPLES OF PRESERVING GENOCIDE CLOTHING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Artifacts of genocide embody emotional, cultural and preservation challenges. The conservation of clothing at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) in Cambodia is a compelling example of the struggle to balance memory and access with safeguarding material culture that memorializes victims.

There are no blueprints for preservation of these collections; a collaborative process forged a unique set of protocols. TSGM must balance the national narrative with personal histories and the changing perspectives of future generations, while addressing historic truths in a dynamic political landscape. Approaches from archeological conservation and anthropology were combined with practical triage methods. Pragmatic solutions were needed for sustainable practice in a tropical climate, using materials and protocols that can be locally advanced. The resulting guidelines, while based on standard conservation practices, are adjusted to suit these parameters.

This work demands self-reflection and challenges the ethical roles of outside ‘experts,’ to define ‘best practices’ for cultural heritage protection. The power of these objects eliminates the standard hierarchy of the conservator-to-trainee relationship. Holistic training and broad discussions resulted in informed decisions made by Cambodian stakeholders. This project has strengthened a commitment by Cambodian stewards to preserve their heritage, and, by extension, the legacy of the nation.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The former Khmer Rouge torture site known as Security Prison 21 (S-21) is now the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) in Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh. It is an emblematic site of memory for Cambodians and the global community, receiving more than 97,000 Cambodian and 423,000 foreign visitors in 2018. From 1975 to 1979 over 18,000 men, women and children were imprisoned, tortured, and exterminated at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (Democratic Kampuchea government) at this site alone (Chandler 1999; ECCC 2020). The work of transforming the complex into a memorial and museum was initiated by Vietnamese and Cambodian forces in January 1979, with the explicit goals of bearing witness to atrocities and to gather evidence for trials of the Khmer Rouge leadership (Hawk 1981; Chandler 1999). To that end, the evidence was put on display in massive piles: clothing, shackles, stacks of torture instruments, thousands of prisoner photos and forced confessions. The sheer volume of artifacts directly illustrates the suffering of thousands and tells a story of overwhelming violence and loss.

TSGM bears witness to the atrocities committed on its grounds through the preservation of the original buildings and collections. There is a screening room where films about the Khmer Rouge regime can be viewed, a meditation room, and specialized exhibits. Most visitors are mentored through the hallowed site with a well-researched and respectful audio tour, available in twelve languages. Today, the site is managed by the Ministry of Culture and Arts of Cambodia and the archives are inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. It is a complex site that serves as a place of reflection, commemoration,

and education through preserving and presenting evidence of the past and keeping alive the memory of those who perished under the Khmer Rouge Regime (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2021).

The museum archives contain the largest existing documentary record of the Democratic Kampuchea government prison system and the mass atrocities committed under the Khmer Rouge regime (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2021.) Between 2018 and 2021 the archives were digitized and incorporated into a bi-lingual website, an undertaking that is a tremendous contribution to one of Tuol Sleng's major goals: to provide a place for education and healing where the younger generation and Khmer Rouge era survivors can access information about their history and hold dialogues together on peace and non-violence (Archives 2021).

Simultaneously, a pioneering textile preservation project directly addressed the collection of approximately 4,000 textiles and articles of clothing belonging to victims and Khmer Rouge cadre. Funded by the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, two grants (2017-2018 and 2019-2021) sustained efforts to provide badly needed triage intervention for the degraded textile collections. The threefold goal of these grants was to provide crucial preventive conservation training for the TSGM staff, to document and safely store the textiles, and to implement sustainable long-term preservation strategies for the collection.

## **2. THE CLOTHING**

The clothing in the collection was gathered from the S-21 complex and surrounding areas in the months that followed the fall of the Khmer Rouge. While the chronological history of the collection is not entirely known, primary sources and anecdotal evidence provide valuable insight. Prisoners were usually stripped of their clothing upon arrival as 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; En pers. comm.). Interviews with museum staff from the 1980s suggest that visitors helped themselves to much needed clothing from the original open

air piles on display at the newly formed museum and memorial.



**Figure 1** Circa 1980 images from the Tuol Sleng archive (top, bottom left) illustrate how the clothing display has changed over time. By 2018, the textile display consisted of two cases and a framed archival image of the 'inaugural' piles (bottom right). Archival images courtesy of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum archives.

Clothing has been a part of the permanent exhibition at TSGM since its inception, and historic photographs illustrate how the clothing displays have changed over time. Around 2011, a portion of the clothing was placed in two display cases and the remainder of the garment collection was placed in black plastic bags in a storage room, undocumented and unsorted. In 2014 Director Mr. Visoth CHHAY recognized the imminent danger that the collection faced in its degraded state, exacerbated by poor storage conditions. He directed conservation staff to remove the collection from the black plastic bags, sort the objects by type, and place the sorted collection in vented plastic bins. They remained as such until the first textile conservation project began in 2018.



**Figure 2** Before 2014 the collection was stored in black plastic bags (left image). The next step was sorting the textiles by type and storing in vented plastic bins until conservation could begin in earnest (right image). Images courtesy of TSGM.

### 3. DEVISING A CONSERVATION APPROACH

The significance of the collection is defined by its materiality; these articles of clothing have survived to tell the stories of this period of history when thousands of individuals did not. The artifacts pose emotional, cultural, and preservation challenges for conservation professionals. There is a responsibility to do the ‘right thing’ in working with local stakeholders who are deeply connected to these materials. The need to care for these objects was derived from the communally shared principle that the preservation of the clothing is vitally important to pay respect to and preserve the memories of the people who suffered and died. There is a shared belief that this work ensures that the lessons learned from this dark period of human history are not forgotten and provides access to the surviving artifacts for further research and peace studies.

Preserving genocide clothing offers a particular set of challenges. As little research on the preservation of textiles related to human atrocities has been conducted or published, the protocols for triage and long-term care of the collection were ultimately a combination of western conservation strategies, archaeological approaches, and an ongoing series of discussions with a wide range of invested parties (Garcia-Alonso and Lacombe, pers. comm.). The need for immediate triage to slow the deterioration of these susceptible organic materials was collaboratively identified, and formed the initial and fundamental conversations regarding the long-term preservation of the collection. Stakeholders that were consulted during the process included the director and staff of TSGM, survivors of the regime and those who lost loved ones, researchers and allied professionals with a deep connection and understanding of the events that occurred at S-21, and cultural heritage professionals with a wide range

of backgrounds. From these detailed discussions, guidelines for how to approach the collection emerged.

First and foremost, Tuol Sleng's policies mandate that artifacts cannot be altered in any irreversible way. This directive underscored the need for an approach based on the guidelines of archeological conservation, which necessitates retaining as much contextual information as possible and permits only those interventions which will not inhibit future research or interpretive use (Brooks et al. 1996).

The textiles in the temporary plastic crates had never been documented or catalogued, and devising a collection care approach was difficult without knowing what made up the collection. Stakeholders agreed that the individual articles of clothing would be documented in an inventory as the archives and other sections of the collection had been. The process of cataloging and assigning accession numbers, with a focus on written and photographic documentation, was considered a necessary first step in the conservation approach. The inventory established an understanding of the materials and began the process of recognizing and appreciating the value of these surviving artifacts.

Discussions about interventive actions related to the accumulation of decades of soiling, biological growth, and insect debris drove the decision to surface clean only. The risk of wet cleaning, with its potential to remove important evidentiary information or cause substantial damage, was determined to be too great by all parties. These risks directly contradict TSGM's mandate that any treatment must avoid causing irreversible changes. However, stakeholders also agreed that failing to remove the heaviest soiling and encrustations could obscure important identifying information. Through these conversations it was collaboratively decided that surface cleaning be incorporated into the initial triage and inventory workflow. The dirt, dust, and hair removed during surface cleaning was considered to have human 'agency'. This material was retained as part of the collection, in respect to the deceased. This is human genocide archeology; the purpose is to keep all data. Not all deteriorating factors can be fully removed, nor should they.

Several certainties were affirmed through the many conversations surrounding the textile collection at TSGM. This memorial site is of profound importance to Cambodians, and the actions of preservation deepen their sense of ownership and their roles as cultural heritage professionals. Working directly with the clothing or finding a familiar school shirt reaffirms a personal commitment to honoring and protecting memory. There is a real awareness of safeguarding this site for individual and national purposes. Heartfelt discussions with the museum director, survivors, and historians made it clear that treating each piece of clothing and textile fragment with the deepest respect was the foundation of all preservation work. Respect for each physical artifact, the memory of each individual, and the collective history of the site and historical event was inscribed into the treatment of each textile as a personal memory.

#### **4. ESTABLISHING THE TEXTILE ARCHIVE**

The actual protocols that were eventually decided upon are based on respect for the object, suitability to the tropical climate, concern for future use and study, staff capacity, and sustainable practice. Each step of the process was carefully discussed and considered within the frameworks determined by the stakeholders and the guidelines and best practices for collections care. The triage approach, devised to arrest further deterioration by limiting risk factors, was tailored specifically for clothing that is extremely

degraded due to history and climate. Moreover, the procedures and protocols were designed so that the staff can continue to implement collections care initiatives after the conclusion of the project.

Each textile that was complete enough to be recognizable was assigned an inventory number, tagged with a cotton label, and documented with digital photography. Detailed information including any unique features like inscriptions and repairs were recorded in Khmer on a paper form. An abbreviated Microsoft Excel database was created to provide access to basic information about individual pieces.

All of the clothing is in poor condition. Garments bear signs of original use from the wearer, often with multiple repairs, in addition to decades of decomposition, staining, and infestations. Each textile was surface cleaned with brushes, spatulas, and a locally purchased vacuum to remove extreme soiling and embedded detritus. The removal of surface soiling often revealed additional information, including lettering and manufacturing data on military accessories. The collection includes civilian and military clothing and accessories of men, women, and children. There are over 3,000 relatively intact objects and another 1,000 or more unidentifiable fragments. Three quarters of the items appear to be associated with Khmer Rouge military or S-21 guards. About 100 caps contain embroidered or penned names. The clothing of children, including several pairs of boy's shorts and three dresses, speak to the magnitude of the violence and loss.



**Figure 3** Extensive repairs and hand-stitched personalization provide insight into the lives of those who lived and died during the Khmer Rouge regime. These pieces of clothing are evidence that families and children were victims at S-21. From left to right: a small, hand-made dress (TSL.2018.055), man's shirt with extensive patchwork mends (TSL.2020.0904) and a dress with distinctive 1960's pattern (TSL.2020.0908). Images courtesy of TSGM.

Processing the mixed-material fragments required a more 'mass' archaeological approach. The fragments were processed in batches through a large screen, repeatedly shaken to dislodge and remove soiling. The groups of fragments were documented with digital photography and examined for any recognizable objects. During this process several significant artifacts were identified including a single gold earring, a handwritten letter, and a piece of a silk *krama* scarf.





**Figure 4** Sokphen Chhaeng and Julia Brennan work outside during the monsoon season. Adapting a traditional archeological field sieve, loose soiling was shaken out from the textile fragments and carefully examined and retained, prior to being put in microclimate storage. Personal protective equipment was worn to reduce exposure to potentially harmful substances.

In addition to documenting the collection, a central goal of the project was to identify and implement a long-term preservation strategy to protect these organic materials from the tropical Cambodian climate. The textile storage room was fitted with locally sourced, powder-coated metal shelving units, metal window screening, and oscillating fans. Despite these improvements the storage room remains largely open to the exterior environment and susceptible to water and termite damage. To address these limitations an innovative, low-cost and sustainable microclimate storage system was employed. The system was developed by Rhino Research Group for the agriculture industry and adapted for use with the textile collection. The textiles are placed in transparent, airtight, polypropylene containers with built-in hygrometers. Aluminum silicate zeolite “drying beads” are placed inside the containers and condition the interior air by absorbing water vapor. This ensures that all materials are maintained at a stable relative humidity. The beads are removed or added to the containers as needed to regulate internal conditions. They are easily regenerated in a locally purchased convection oven and can be reused indefinitely. This system is easy to monitor and requires no continual electrical supply. The textiles are maintained in stable relative humidity while being protected from water, pests, and soiling. The majority of the textile collection has been rehoused with this storage system and is both visible and accessible.



**Figure 5** The textile storage room now houses the textile collection in conditioned microclimate boxes.

## **5. COLLECTIONS CARE TRAINING**

The multifaceted preservation project was designed to provide preventive and textile conservation training to deepen the collection care capacity of the TSGM staff through on-site workshops consisting of hands-on experiences and classroom lectures, accompanied by remote support. Chenda KHO, head of the conservation lab, and four graduates with degrees in archeology participated in several years of ongoing training, spread out over multiple site visits and supplemented with online mentoring and communication. The project also provided opportunities for cross-training of other museum staff and fostered relationships between departments.

The curriculum was tailored to the needs of the collection, the skill level of the participants, and the resources that were locally available. To broaden knowledge about this particular genre of textiles, initial lectures addressed global genocide memorials and how textiles are interpreted and preserved. The images of materials from other mass atrocity memorials reinforced that as stewards of cultural heritage the TSGM staff are not alone, and in fact confront the same challenges of climate, resources, staffing, training, long-term exhibit and storage.

English was the primary language for these workshops, but all documents were translated into Khmer. Bi-lingual informational materials including workflows, identification charts for local insects, and glossaries were created, illustrated, printed, laminated and posted in the conservation lab for easy reference. Learning to examine and describe textiles with common terminology was a primary objective and the training components directly supported the development of the protocols. For example, examination methods and bilingual terminology used to describe objects' condition informed the cataloguing and database. This led to the formation of a trained team who carry out the daily work of assessing and processing each textile as part of the inventoried collection. This team also carries out the



routine preventive tasks of monitoring the microclimate boxes, pest activity throughout the museum, and environmental monitoring for the site overall.

With the assistance of a translator, additional topics were covered in the 2020 workshop. Managing light in exhibition spaces, methods for displaying textiles, and basic textile conservation treatment approaches were discussed with all participants, including staff from other Cambodian cultural institutions. The workshop, which built on previous training sessions, was divided between the classroom and hours spent critically examining the exhibition and storage spaces to identify strengths and areas for improvement. This combination of theoretical lectures and hands-on experience provided opportunities to evaluate and problem-solve in the collection spaces, which facilitated a greater understanding of the foundational preventive principles.



**Figure 6** Lectures and classroom discussions were reenforced by time spent in the museum galleries, discussing exhibits and brainstorming ways to improve collections care. The exercise here in the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary exhibition, was to learn how to measure light, physically reduce the amount of LUX, and install a hygrometer and blue wool fading card in the display case.

A detailed site-wide risk assessment survey was completed by workshop participants in 2020. This extensive report provides a comprehensive overview of the exhibitions, written documentation of the conditions and challenges inherent to open displays, and recommendations for taking next steps to care for the collection and exhibit spaces. Immediate outcomes included a practical solution to improve the

display of light sensitive objects like textiles and paper-based materials. The team also improved the current textile display case by replacing non-archival components with non-reactive materials and employed creative techniques to reduce the number of garments on display from more than 300 to approximately 50. Such improvements to the site are practical, empowering examples of the conservation strategies discussed and practiced during the on-site workshops.

## **6. THE INTANGIBLE VALUE AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT**

The work requires self-reflection by conservators regarding the ethical roles of outside ‘experts,’ as well as defining ‘best practices’ for protection of cultural heritage. Nothing can prepare the ‘outside’ consultant for the anguish heard in a survivor’s account of losing loved ones in the location where we work. No amount of training or professional expertise is a qualification to engage in this hallowed task. The work is deeply humbling and often painful. Clothing, in particular these tattered remains, speaks to people about the details of their history. As colleague Sokphen CHHEANG says, “through textiles I feel compassion beyond compassion that is difficult to speak.” (2021). The power of these physical materials to bear witness, tell a story of loss, and foster healing bonds the heritage team in different ways. It could be described as a personal partnership of common purpose and results, without the standard hierarchies of conservation practice. The preservation training takes place within this space, characterized by a spirit of sharing, conversations, questions, mistakes, revisions, bi-lingual ‘charades’, group lunch breaks and birthdays, and camaraderie.

Preserving materials that represent individuals is a constant reminder that conservation can be an act of reconciliation. At Tuol Sleng the conservation lab is in a former room of torture that retains the scars of its past with scrawled graffiti and chains still attached to the walls. High on a shelf is a small Buddhist shrine. Each day, one of the team refills the offerings of water, flowers and rice and offers blessings. This shrine presides over the daily work, and over each of us. Before working on the clothing of the victims, incense sticks are lit and the smoke fills and cleanses the workspace. Our colleagues ask for permission to work with these materials that contain the spirits of the deceased, to honor and respect them. This must be done.

## **7. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

The impacts of the textile preservation initiative can be seen across TSGM. Accomplishing the primary goals of inventorying, documenting and rehousing the textile collection has increased access to and an awareness of this important body of textile artifacts. This project established a sustainable conservation workflow and helped to initiate a new group of young heritage professionals who engage in this challenging work. Expanding responsibilities are opening paths for continued relationships, mentoring, and collaborations. A greater understanding of the role of conservation has resulted in the near completion of the textile conservation project, success of a first risk assessment of the collections, and significant improvements to recent exhibitions. The team played an essential role in creating an exhibit to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the museum in 2019 and a 2020 exhibition about the tragic story of returned intellectuals who died at S-21. They collaborated with the exhibition team, reached out for guidance on materials and methods, and prepared object cases with improved conservation standards and monitoring tools.

Moreover, these efforts helped to produce exhibits that more holistically engage the staff in the history of the site. This is further stimulated by personal growth and awareness in their own roles in preserving the legacy of their country. When asked about the importance of the textile collection, Sokphen CHHEANG said “In addition to documents and materials, textiles are also a part of helping students who want to study and research the history of the Khmer Rouge and the events that took place at S-21. Sometimes it is difficult to accept what happened. But textiles are part of the evidence that the events that took place at S-21 were real events.” (2021). The team increasingly recognizes the importance of their efforts to save not only the artifact, but their own history, for future generations. In 2021 colleague Sokly CHOUB reflected on this, saying:

“The importance of the clothes at TSGM is important evidence for humanity, both inside and outside the country...and to study and understand the living conditions and hardships of the people, during the Khmer Rouge era. As for conservation work, it is valuable for the team to take care of and preserve it as a proof for younger generations to know the scarcity, life in wartime, how miserable it is? To make everyone consider, understand and prevent this event happening in future.”

Alongside our colleagues we experienced a reexamination of our own practice, skills, and principles. We questioned and collaborated to identify the most respectful, suitable, and achievable protocols for these degraded but nearly sacred textiles. Though the approach is rooted in contemporary textile conservation practices, this work is driven by a different set of expectations, outcomes, and human connections, as described by our colleagues. The ongoing preservation effort demonstrates that this conservation work is about people and developing the compassion for those who we work with and as well those whose clothing we preserve. Our integrity rests in our flexibility, our long view of humanity, and our small role as collaborative conservators today, together with our Cambodian colleagues.

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