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PRESERVATION OF CLOTHING AND MEMORY IN CAMBODIA: A COLLABORATIVE MODEL

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Artifacts of genocide present a particular set of emotional, cultural, and conservation challenges. Forty years after the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), Cambodia’s Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (S-21 Prison) is a compelling example of the struggle to balance authenticity, access, and sustainable preservation. The conservation of its genocide textiles, by far the most intimate and perishable of any genocide artifacts, has gained urgency for their repair, storage and display. A multi-year textile conservation triage and training project incorporated regional sensitivities to prioritise the victims’ clothing as a living and accessible collection. The project’s guiding principles were respect for the objects, suitability to the tropical climate, concern about future use and study, and sustainable practice. The resulting protocols modified prevailing conservation and archeological approaches, and integrated local values to apply a multi-faceted approach to reducing risks. These historic materials now carefully catalogued and better protected, are historic touchstones, revealing human stories and details of S-21. This physical connection to history gave the stakeholders a deeper understanding of conservation and why their role is essential to preserve their country’s legacies.

KEYWORDS: *Khmer Rouge, Cambodia, genocide, Tuol Sleng, victims’ clothing, textile preservation, sustainable, tropical climate*

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the cultural significance of restoring the clothing of victims at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It describes the ongoing work to preserve, interpret, and build capacity to ensure the survival of these collections for future generations. Preserving these deeply personal artifacts of the atrocities that occurred at this site also builds a culture of accountability, and seeks to deter such crimes from happening again. This project provided the funding and training to develop a site specific and collaborative effort to preserve vulnerable organic materials at a living memorial.

Clothing is distinctive in its universality: the simple familiarity of a piece of clothing invites us to connect with the wearer, the personal story and history. A TSGM blouse’s physicality transforms it into a tangible talisman that somehow condenses an immeasurable crime and the atrocities of the site into a small familiar object. The emerging conservation solutions engaged all stakeholders in a common cause: to perform the difficult work to face and preserve the past, bring back to life what remains of a victim, and repair the threads that join people together. This work re-affirmed that conservation was an act of reconciliation, unifying the team, and providing collective and individual healing.

Cambodia’s Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is a compelling example of a living memorial. More than forty years after the 1979 fall of the Khmer Rouge (KR), the tropical climate and lack of staff training had imperilled its artifacts and raised concerns about the repair, storage and display of this witness-bearing collection. There was an urgent need to rescue the fragile textile collections. To accomplish this required training and support of local professionals in preservation skills, and together establishing a way to balance long-term sustainable preservation and access, in a limited resource environment. Conservation interventions were timely (Visoth, C. 2016-2020).

As a textile conservator with twenty years experience teaching and developing heritage preservation projects in Southeast Asia, I was brought in to help design and implement the initial efforts to conserve and document mass quantities of victims’ clothing from a well known Khmer Rouge prison and extermination site. This project (2018–2021) was supported by the US Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP), a branch of the US State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the Cambodian Ministry of Culture (Bureau of Cultural Affairs 2020).

This multifaceted collaborative project was designed to:

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- (1) provide preventive and textile conservation training for Cambodian colleagues to establish active stewardship;
- (2) develop acceptable treatment guidelines and an inventory system for the formation of an accessible textile collection; and
- (3) create a sustainable long-term storage system that mitigates threats from the tropical climate.

The collections care training introduced new generations of Cambodians to technical elements of conservation work, and laid a foundation for expanded practice throughout the site. The textile and clothing collection served TSGM's mission by furthering conservation and research, and fostering professional exchanges for reconciliation and peace studies (Visoth, C. 2016–2020). The project's extended time-frame expanded access to data and historical studies, as well as conservation expertise. These historic artifacts are now being preserved, and their guardians are invested personally in preserving their country's legacy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE TEXTILES

Tuol Sleng is an emblematic memorial site for Cambodians and the global community. Supported by UNESCO 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 120,000 Cambodians and 403,000 foreigners in 2019 alone (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2020). Originally built as a secondary school, Tuol Sleng was appropriated by the Democratic Kampuchea government and used as a mass detention, torture, and extermination site. Between 1975 and 1979, more than 18,000 men, women and children passed through Tuol Sleng, referred to as Security Prison 21 (S-21), a small percentage of the estimated 2.5 to 3 million deaths during the KR period (Boyle 2019, Chandler 1999, Ponchaud 1978). According to published records, the site was transformed into a museum starting in January 1979 by the Vietnamese and Cambodian intervention forces (Chandler 1999, Hawk 1981, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2019) (Figure 1).

The museum bears witness to the atrocities committed on its grounds. Much has been preserved: the original buildings, instruments of torture, photographs of prisoners, archives of 'confessions' extracted by torture, paintings by prisoners, and victims' clothing (Boyle 2019). The clothing was gathered from the buildings and grounds in the months that followed the museum's establishment. There are striking accounts of clothing piles at S-21 when the intervention armies arrived in 1979, and two of the five child survivors attribute their survival to hiding in piles of clothing (Chandler 1999, Eng 2018, En, Pen 2018, pers.comm.). It seems that the clothing provided a way to show the scale of the killings under the KR.



FIGURE 1. Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2019. Photo Julia M Brennan.

Photographs taken in the 1979–1980 period show enormous piles of clothing in one of the classrooms and on the grounds, as well as 'cleaned' and more organised garments hanging in a glass case (Hawk 1981, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2019). Based on what remains today, it is clear that a majority of the original mass of clothing is gone (Figure 2).

A portion of the original display remains today, juxtaposed with black and white reproductions of prisoner mug shots. Film footage and photographs illustrate how the clothing was used over the past four decades to tell the story of the victims who suffered at S-21 (Becker 2010, Hawk 1981, Chandler 1999, Eng 2018, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2019). The context in which the clothing was originally collected and displayed illustrated its significance to the Cambodians survivors and founders of the museum and memorial.

THE CONSERVATION PATH

A piece of clothing reveals the details of that person; it becomes the child, the mother . . . , repair returns life to it and connects it to the living ones . . . mending the social fabric of society. (Brennan 2019)

By 2015, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum had over 3,000 items of clothing stored in plastic bins and bags, all subjected to mould, pests and other biological threats. Director Mr Visoth Chhay made it a priority to secure funding to preserve the clothing with the goal of training museum staff in collections care. A first grant in 2018 launched the project, with a second sustaining grant provided for 2019–2021. Conservator Jackie Peterson and the author served as chief facilitators to guide the project with four Cambodian colleagues (Brennan, Peterson-Grace & Chenda 2019). On-site training and remote support over the course of four years addressed the project's primary goal: to build collaboration and trust in order to deepen conservation and collections care knowledge



FIGURE 2. (a) Piles of victims' clothing on a platform demonstrate the enormity of the crimes after the Tuol Sleng Museum opened to the public six months after the flight of the Khmer Rouge, (b) Visitors commented on the stench but often removed viable pieces for personal use (En, Pen 2018). When the Tuol Sleng Museum opened to the public just six months after the flight of the Khmer Rouge, victims' clothes were piled on a platform to demonstrate the enormity of the crimes. Accessed from the Publication *Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum*, 2019, Cambodia.

in Cambodia through the preservation of the remaining textiles and clothing. Kho Chenda, Head of the Conservation Department, and four conservation trainees participated in approximately twenty-five weeks of onsite training (until the Covid 19 pandemic) and regular long-distance mentoring (Figure 3).

There are no organised guidelines in mainstream textile conservation studies or literature for conserving these kinds of collections and their unique stories of atrocities. Therefore, the conservation path forward was firstly and most importantly designed in collaboration with Cambodian colleagues and people who had a deep connection to this history as survivors, historians, archaeologists and filmmakers (Garcia-Alonso, L, 2016-2020), Lacombe, L, 2016-2020). Other groundwork included outreach to global sites with genocide textiles, literary and film searches, discussions with forensic scientists and authorities on mass atrocities, and conducting simulations with purposely soiled and decomposed clothing (Mason 2019). The preservation framework was also informed by the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 2013), which emphasises preserving the cultural significance of a site, stakeholders, and their interaction (Mason 2019). Based



FIGURE 3. Participants in the 2020 the workshop, along with members of the US Embassy, funders of the project 2017-2021. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

on respect for the existing *fabric, use, associations* and *meanings*, the Charter mandates a cautious approach of 'changing as much as necessary but as little as possible,' using all the knowledge, skills and disciplines which can contribute to the study and care of the place (Australia ICOMOS 2013).

Preservation of victims' clothing is important for several reasons. It is a direct way to respect and preserve the stories of those who suffered and died. It brings the experiences of this dark period of human history to current visitors and stakeholders, integrating them into the common history and thus ensuring that the lessons are not forgotten (Becker 2010). Furthermore, the actual acts of preservation extend the physical life of this material evidence of the genocide. Finally, the preservation creates a foundation and resources for further research and peace studies. As Cambodia's Culture Minister Mr Chheng Phon stated in the 1980s,

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)

These articles of clothing survived to tell the stories of victims as witness bearing materials. Clothing, in its simple familiarity, speaks unquestionably to people about the details of their history. The artifacts of genocide carry evidence of the victims, and all must be cared for, for all are historical touchstones and evidence. Each textile, fragmentary and worn, was saved (Mason 2019). Colleague 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’ (Peck 2018).

The need for immediate triage to slow the deterioration of these vulnerable organic materials was collaboratively identified, and formed the first and fundamental conversations about the long-term preservation of the textiles. As such, it was decided in collaboration with stakeholders, that any treatment had to preserve as much contextual information as possible about the whole collection as well as its individual components. Furthermore, interventions could not inhibit future access for research or other interpretive use. TSGM policies governing the collections, mandated they could not be wet cleaned in any comprehensive conventional manner, removed from the site, or altered in any non-reversible way (Mason 2019). Stakeholders agreed that the each textile would be documented in an inventory as the paper archives at TSGM. 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. This process encouraged an understanding of the materials and helped stakeholders to recognise and value these remaining artifacts (Figure 4(a,b)).

These textile conservation protocols mirror those of archaeological textile conservation, in which respect for the object and its physical and cultural context are paramount. In practice, this translates into minimal intervention in order to preserve as much information as possible in the primary source object (Brooks, Eastop & Bennett 1996, Garcia-Alonso 2017, Lacombe 2016, pers comm). Discussions about treatment options confirmed that not all deteriorating factors could be fully removed, nor should be. By adapting some standard conservation and archeological approaches to site specific and local values and

resources, the protocols developed at TSGM took an integrated multi-faceted approach to reducing risk factors. Respect for the physical artifact, and respect for the collective and individual history was inscribed into the treatment of each textile.

ENHANCING STAFF CAPACITY AND CONSERVATION PROTOCOLS

The project scope included documentation, creation of artifact databases, surface cleaning, and the introduction of an affordable technology that slows deterioration using a passive microclimate storage system. On-site workshops, classroom lectures, and long-distance support addressed the primary goal: to strengthen conservation and collections care knowledge in Cambodia within the framework of preserving the textile collection.

In order to broaden participants’ knowledge about this particular genre of textiles, several lectures focused on genocide memorials and museums globally, and how those textiles are displayed, interpreted and preserved. Seeing examples of ‘other’ genocide textiles reinforced that they at Tuol Sleng are not isolated. Many Cambodian colleagues had not known about other countries’ genocide histories; they were particularly interested in the similarities in textile materials and evidence, and related to the challenges of climate, resources, staffing, training, long term exhibit and storage goals (Brennan 2020, Mason 2019).

Preventive conservation was introduced and examined through the ten agents of deterioration as defined by the Canadian Conservation Institute and the CCI Notes (2017). Working with the artifacts reinforced understanding of each factor and risk, and illustrated ways to mitigate harm. The approach emphasised preventive actions that limit the risk of causing harm to artifacts, rather than more ‘aggressive’ treatments that may diminish the importance of the



FIGURE 4. (a) & (b) Conservation team examines and writes careful documentation in Khmer. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

clothing as historic ‘documents.’ In practice, this meant that textiles retained some of the soiling and residual materials that give them context. However, through group discussions, it was decided that surface cleaning was important in order to reveal important details and information on the objects. The dirt and particles removed from all the textiles was retained in a storage container, as it is considered to contain the spirits of those who died. As a team, careful surface cleaning methods, maintenance and monitoring of the cleaned clothing were slowly developed.

Skills taught and practiced in the onsite workshops were applied to processing the textile collection. For example, textile examination methods and bilingual terminology used to describe condition informed the cataloguing. People worked in pairs discussing and describing the details of clothing and vocabulary. While English was the primary instructional language, documents were bi-lingual, translated into Khmer. Together the team translated all the protocols and procedures, such as cleaning steps, workflow, local insect charts, glossary of terms, and hands-on procedures, into bi-lingual and graphically illustrated documents. These were printed, laminated and posted for easy reference. Learning to examine textiles, evaluate their condition, talk about the specific details and overpowering historical evidence, and describe them in common terminology was a continual objective. The often-lively group discussions to establish those terms switched between English and Khmer.

The goal was to establish a well-defined inventory to facilitate ongoing care, future research and interpretation of the collection at TSGM, and to complement the well-known paper and photographic archives. About 1,300 individual articles of clothing that were complete, or intact enough to be recognisable, were inventoried, photographed, stored. The small textile fragments and plastics estimated at 2,000 pieces, were batch-processed with a different method of repeated sifting and sorting to disentangle fragments and identify unique artifacts. Though many of these

pieces were unidentifiable, small ‘Special ID’ objects such as earrings, wallets, letters, jewellery pouches, and historic fabric scraps also surfaced. Some of these were deeply personal finds after forty years of abandonment in a challenging climate (Figure 5(a,b))

The basic textile conservation steps were as follows:

- (1) Placed daily offerings of incense, flowers, rice, water at the Buddhist shrine in the conservation lab, and asked for the workspace, we the caretakers, and the ‘sacred’ clothing inhabited by the spirits of the deceased to be blessed and protected.
- (2) Each object was assigned an inventory number, photographed with a digital camera, and uploaded to individual object files. These images serve as a visual record of condition before treatment. Later after-treatment photographs document conservation actions, resulting condition, and any significant features, such as names, repairs, labels, and damage from the historic event.
- (3) Condition, description, and unique features were recorded on a bilingual (English and Khmer) hard copy form and filed in binders. To ensure easy access to the information, a digital database was created in Microsoft Excel. This abbreviated, searchable database contains basic information about each object. As TSGM moves toward an institution-wide database for all artifacts, this digital database can be migrated to other programs.
- (4) Each object was surface cleaned with a combination of brushes and a locally-purchased variable speed vacuum. Surface cleaning resulted in greater legibility of each object.
- (5) Inventory numbers were written on cotton tape and hand-sewn to intact objects.
- (6) Data for ‘special ID’ objects was entered additionally into unique illustrated dossiers, so that scholars or staff can easily view them.
- (7) Fragments were sifted in sieves, sorted, documented, and stored in batches.



FIGURE 5. (a) Batch processing tangled fragments was done outside due to the overwhelming dust and particles. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, (b) Processing recognisable textiles one by one, including surface cleaning with vacuum and soft brushes. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

- (8) All textiles were reboxed in numbered boxes with locations recorded in the master database and paper records, making object recall possible.
- (9) Extracted dirt, considered to have human ‘agency’ was carefully stored as part of the record, and for future research.

PILOTING THE MICRO-CLIMATE STORAGE

A low cost, low-tech microclimate storage system developed by Thailand-based Rhino Research Group for the agriculture industry was established for long term, on-site storage of the collection. This passive system mitigates the effects of tropical climate on the textiles in the storage system through the use of molecular sieve technology. Tuol Sleng (and a project at Nyamata Genocide Memorial in Rwanda) were the first cultural heritage projects known to utilise this particular technology for storing artifacts. This protocol was tested during pilots in Thailand, the United States, Cambodia, and Rwanda; and is supported by Rhino Research’s trainer and scientist and USA-based branch, Dry Chain America¹¹ For more information about drying beads see *Drying Beads* (2014). (Rhino-Research).

Textiles were placed into high-grade, air tight polypropylene containers. Visible hygrometers measure the interior relative humidity and temperature. Aluminum silicate zeolites known as ‘Dry Beads’, which absorb water molecules, were sealed in the containers. The Drybeads were removed when desired relative humidity is reached, and the re-sealed boxes maintain the desired relative humidity. The Drybeads, which can be used indefinitely, were easily regenerated in a locally purchased convection oven. Other than occasional regeneration using electricity, this microclimate storage system relied on regular visual monitoring of the hygrometers and not a power grid (Rhino-Research).

For most of the textiles, the goal was to store them at a relative humidity (Rh) level that will prevent development of mould and other biological bacteria, especially given the tropical conditions. Therefore, the target was a broad range of 35–55%, avoiding sharp fluctuations. Two years of steady data from TSGM showed that the DryStore boxes successfully maintained a stable relative humidity microclimate regardless of ambient conditions. As the pilot program enters its third year (in Rwanda as well), additional data will assist in a more comprehensive analysis (Figure 6).

STORIES AND MEMORIES REVEALED THROUGH CONSERVATION

The photographic archives created by the Khmer Rouge at S-21 showed that many prisoners were photographed in the garments they arrived in: mostly blue or black collared KR cadre shirts, supporting the strict clothing mandate of the KR, or green ‘fatigue’ military shirts. Other prisoners were pictured in



FIGURE 6. Learning how to read the hygrometers on the Dryboxes to track RH and temperature. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

everyday clothing, including t-shirts, patterned blouses, tube skirts, and some with the *krama* traditional plaid scarf wrapped around shoulder temporarily for the photo. Today, the museum’s textile collection tells its own stories of war and hardship and expands the details of what happened at S-21. Identifiable artifacts included the clothing and accessories of women and men, children, military, Khmer Rouge and laypersons. There were almost no manufacturer or tailor labels in any of the clothing. Most of the articles of clothing were machine stitched and either local or presumably of Chinese manufacture (En Nhem & Duong 2014, p. 36). The textiles included twenty categories including shirts, t-shirts, children’s clothing, socks, shoes, boots, rubber tire sandals (sometimes referred to ‘Ho Chi Minh’ sandals), carrying pouches and militia bags, bag straps, wallets and underwear.

All the clothing was in poor condition, showing not only original use from the wearer, but decades of decomposition, staining and infestations. There was a prevalence of repairs on much of the clothing. Over and over again, garments were stitched, and patched up, suggesting a heartbreaking sense of human determination and survivorship (Him 2001).

Three quarters of the items are identifiable as Khmer Rouge military or cadre clothing and accessories. They include pants, shirts, the signature Chinese (*Mao style*) caps, backpacks, canteen holders, ‘kit bags’ and ammo pouches, straps from bags, boots, and belts. It was evident that some of these items were possibly over-dyed: dyed with mud, charcoal or a dyestuff obtained from *mok clua* (ebony fruit) (Chileng & Mortland 2005, Him 2001, Simen 2001). In addition, there are a large number of the dark green military fatigues issued to KR military and prison guards (En Nhem & Duong D 2014, p. 37). Not surprisingly, there were some American military manufacture markings on selected pieces, including a US Army issue medical bag.

Noteworthy was what was missing: there were no iconic red and white *krama*, the traditional Cambodian

scarf adopted by the Khmer Rouge. While *krama* were present in many of the S21 mug shots, it was assumed that these valuable pieces of clothing were likely repurposed by living cadres. Testimony from museum staff from the 1980s confirmed that the piles of clothing were regularly picked over when the institution first opened. Perhaps people sought out items as different from the drab clothing of their recent harrowing experiences as possible (Eng 2018, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum 2019).

Within the collection there were few examples of coloured or fancy clothing, remnants of life before the Khmer Rouge. A stylish orange little girl's 1960s knit frock with 'Peter Pan collar' had a label from Tokyo. A ladies handbag, made of European-style tapestry fabric, and fragment of a traditional handwoven silk wrapper, evoke a previous era. There was one traditional camisole (found among the tangled fragments) and one flowery tube skirt, its motifs obscured by mould and stains. Several pairs of boys' corduroy shorts, and three little girls' dresses confirmed that children too were victims at S-21.

The conservation team's careful cleaning and cataloguing of these textile artifacts was an 'attempt to restore the individuality—and thus the humanity—of the victims' (Caswell 2014, p. 88) For example, a number of green caps, had first names written in ink or stitched onto the brims (Yathay 1987, p. 43) (Figure 7). Several members of the conservation team have expanded their research into the TSGM archives, in an effort to cross-reference textile items with documents and photos. Ongoing research can investigate military records and data from the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) Tribunal testimonies. These items have created personal connections and inspired myriad questions that have never been addressed regarding the lives of the S21 prisoners. As colleague Sokphen Chheang clearly explained:

In addition to documents and objects, textiles are also a part of helping to study and research the history of the Khmer Rouge and the events that took place at S-21. Sometimes it is



FIGURE 7. Many of the caps have personal names written or embroidered on them. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

difficult to accept what happened. But textiles are part of the evidence that the events that took place at S-21 were real events. (Chheang 2021, pers.comm.)

CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of several years, Tuol Sleng's previously undocumented clothing collection was assessed in new ways and has provided a deeper understanding of the events that occurred during the Khmer Rouge regime. Through this slow and collaborative work, certain observations can be made.

First, the resulting treatment protocol was distinctive to this site, a living memorial, and the preservation of very degraded 'witness bearing' textiles. The stains and other soiling were considered part of the textiles' provenance and valued as fragments of memory and as research materials. Specific limitations on how much to clean or stabilise were developed in collaboration with Cambodian colleagues. Residual soiling and particles were saved as part of the human record. Surface cleaning alone extended the life of these materials and revealed new information about victims. Though the approach incorporates some common textile conservation practices, this work is driven by a different set of expectations, outcomes, and human connections. The conservation protocols were the outcome of a collaborative and holistic approach to these textiles, and to each other, not prevalent in the predominant conservation approach to most textile heritage.

Second, now there is a fuller picture of those who died at S-21. Establishing a formal inventoried textile collection, with high-resolution photographs and detailed descriptions, enhanced the story-telling capacity of these objects, and shed new light on the historical narrative of this period of history. The discovery of physical evidence, names, and labels stimulates new directions in interpretation, analysis, cross-referencing and scholarship, as evidenced by the expanded research by the conservation team.

Third, training and collaborative efforts elevated the significance of the clothing collection and textile heritage for TSGM staff, and ultimately for the public. The success of the project is reflected in the daily work of the participants and in expanded management, including a site-wide master risk assessment, and the addition of data loggers to all the buildings and storage units. The urgency of the conservation challenges and the associated long-term conservation strategies are now better understood. Collaboration and shared learning has affirmed the important role and capabilities of this group to participate in the daily work of textile preservation (Mason 2019). Moreover, the staff has eagerly shared their knowledge and highlights of the project with local students, at STEM fairs, and with other museum colleagues.

Confidence and ownership in this work is empowering. The conservation team designed and prepared two

exhibits of textiles and other artifacts to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the museum, and the tragic story of educated Khmer students who were summoned back to their mother country only to die at S-21. The team reached out for strategic guidance on materials and methods, and successfully produced stable cases that better meet conservation standards. The importance of textile conservation work, while very difficult physically and emotionally, is being strengthened with growing interest and resourcefulness (Figure 8).

FINAL THOUGHTS

On a philosophical level, the daily work at Tuol Sleng raised personal questions about the capacity of conservators as people and professionals, as well as the roles and suitability of outside advisors and so called ‘best practices’. Is the practice of conservation humane enough to repair beyond the physical artifact?

While my personal preparations for this project focused on learning as much as possible about the site and history, my thirty plus years of textile conservation work and grass roots projects did not prepare me for the realities (Becker E 2010, En Nhem & Duong D, 2014, Him 2001, Phal 2019, Ponchaud 1978, Yathay 1987). Working onsite is an overpowering experience: setting up the conservation work space



FIGURE 8. The first display designed and fabricated by the team, using archival materials. Photo Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

in the school room where prisoners were chained to the floor and tortured, with the odour of bio-deterioration emanating from the victims’ clothing. The mass of clothing arouses an enormous sense of the human loss. It makes your heart break—holding a child’s dress in your hands. This work demands empathy, and an openness to learn and share selflessly. At its root is respect for the local stakeholders and survivors, and each other.

Kho Chenda shared that initially her work at TSGM did not cause anxiety or sadness. But as she examined, tagged, photographed, held and smelled more and more textiles, she began to experience another feeling, called ‘*slack snaam*’. This can be translated as the ‘scar of the past’, like a suffering embedded in the textiles (Brennan & Berthon forthcoming). She explained that she imagined those who used that piece of clothing and how they suffered during that time. She further said:

The sorrow is intense because it’s so close to the body, to the skin; I see it with my own eyes and touch it by my own hands. The most difficult ones are the special items, like the shirt ‘with many patches and repairs’, those small fragments tangled together, and the kid’s clothes. (Chenda 2020)

What occurred was the emergence of a new group of heritage professionals who embraced the arduous tasks of preserving the genocide textiles in their country. They recognised the importance of their work to save cultural heritage and sought to learn more and share their knowledge with others. Preserving materials that represent individuals, and transforming them into something recognisable and touchable, is a reminder that conservation can be an act of remembrance and healing. It is only natural that the resulting conservation protocol was based on respect: respect for each physical artifact, the memory of each individual, and the collective history of the site and historical events. As a collaborative process, it utilised each person’s skill sets and personal integrity. By drawing on local stakeholders’ deep connections to the materials, this process is creating a local conservation identity and practice that is specific to the Tuol Seng site and to Cambodia’s history.

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Julia M. Brennan, founder of Caring for Textiles, has worked in the field of textile conservation since 1985. She is committed to conservation outreach and the protection of cultural property by providing stakeholders with sustainable

skills. Since 2000, she has led conservation workshops in Bhutan, Madagascar, Algeria, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Taiwan, and Rwanda in museums, monasteries, genocide memorials, and community based collections. Julia has a BA from Columbia University, and a Masters in art crime from The Association for Research in Crimes Against Art.

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