

Human remains, materiality and memorialisation: Cambodia's bones

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Abstract

The display of human remains is a controversial issue in many contemporary societies, with many museums globally removing them from display. However, their place in genocide memorials is also contested. Objections towards the display of remains are based strongly in the social sciences and humanities, predicated on assumptions made regarding the relationship between respect, identification and personhood. As remains are displayed scientifically and anonymously, it is often argued that the personhood of the remains is denied, thereby rendering the person 'within' the remains invisible. In this article I argue that the link between identification and personhood is, in some contexts, tenuous at best. Further, in the context of Cambodia, I suggest that such analyses ignore the ways that local communities and Cambodians choose to interact with human remains in their memorials. In such contexts, the display of the remains is central to restoring their personhood and dignity.

Key words: Cambodia, genocide, display of human remains, forensic, personhood, respect

Introduction

Between 17 April 1975 and 7 January 1979, the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia. Seeking to create a communist utopia, the regime resulted in the deaths of an estimated quarter of the population through executions, disease, malnutrition and overwork.¹ Millions of others were displaced. As of 2009, over 20,000 mass graves had been located within Cambodia, many of which have remained unexhumed. Research into the Cambodian genocide, as with most human rights atrocities, has tended to be divided along disciplinary lines. A wealth of information exists about the social, historical and cultural conditions contributing to, during and subsequent to the Khmer Rouge regime.² These studies sit alongside a limited number of published forensic studies and notes.³ The lack of crossover between the two approaches is noteworthy, albeit with some exceptions.⁴

This article is an exploratory study discussing how these two approaches might be combined through an examination of the use of human remains as material objects in genocide memorials in Cambodia. Human remains are understood to have a dual nature: as largely symbolic or social markers of people lost to genocide or violence, and as material objects requiring social, political, legal and physical management. I argue that the place of human remains as material objects in the examination of memorialisation and reconciliation practices in Cambodia has been largely neglected. It is by employing an analysis of the remains both as material objects, informed by a forensic or scientific approach to them, as well as social markers that we can fully understand how the dead interact with and shape narratives surrounding the genocide and its remembrance.

Based on an analysis of two genocide memorials, Choeung Ek in Phnom Penh, and Po Tonle stupa on the Bassac River, Kandal Province, I suggest that many analyses of memorials containing human remains disregard the remains as material objects, focusing instead on their symbolic meanings. The analytic gaze is turned away from the remains as objects of analysis. Analyses have tended to echo other debates regarding the display of human remains in contexts such as museums: the displays are there for the edification of outsiders and, as such, the display of remains is inappropriate, dehumanising and disrespectful. This article focuses on the human remains as physical objects which provide evidence of specific events and, as the remains of people, make them vehicles of ongoing emotional attachments and bereavements. Thus, the remains are both subject and object, but in neither guise do they lose their essential humanity. Such an analysis challenges existing approaches to the display of human remains either as profoundly disrespectful to the dead or as items of forensic interest. The reality lies somewhere in between.

This analysis rests on Ingold's call for a turn away from materiality and to a focus on materials.⁵ Materiality itself is an abstraction, and removes us from a consideration of materials, the very structure of objects. Focusing on materials rather than materiality *per se* facilitates an appreciation of objects or artefacts without imbuing them with a false sense of agency.⁶ In utilising this approach, our understanding of human remains as material objects also allows the identification of the connection between subject (personhood) and object (the remains). Where non-forensic approaches find an appreciation of the human remains as materials complex, so too do forensic approaches sublimate the subjective nature of the remains. In this article I explore how these approaches might be usefully reconciled.

I suggest that existing social scientific and humanities analyses of the sites would benefit from engagement with a broader range of available literature and disciplines, particularly regarding the remains themselves. Further, I would echo calls to broaden the ongoing analytical focus on Choeung Ek to sites and memorials outside major cities.⁷ Choeung Ek occupies a unique position as a site accessible to and designed for visitors to provide a specific narrative of the genocide.⁸ It is the best known of the killing fields in Cambodia, reflecting its creation and status as a carefully curated tourist site with strong links to Tuol Sleng.⁹ The human remains are used explicitly to support a carefully crafted narrative developed by the designers and curators. The lack of this surrounding narrative infrastructure

at other memorials and sites facilitates the analysis of them as sites of memorial and the resting place of the remains, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the role of human remains in post-genocidal societies. Two sites form the focus for this analysis: Choeung Ek, in Phnom Penh, visited in September and December 2017, and Po Tonle, Kandal Province, visited in September 2017, although other sites were visited and observations from them also inform the analysis. Choeung Ek was the main killing field, or execution site, for the Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh. It holds the remains of many of the approximately 14,000 prisoners who passed through its associated prison and interrogation centre, Tuol Sleng, or S-21. Discovered after the Vietnamese capture of Phnom Penh, both sites were developed as museums of genocide to illustrate the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime.¹⁰ Tuol Sleng was the pinnacle of a network of security centres and prisons developed by the Khmer Rouge to identify saboteurs and traitors. Po Tonle was one of the regional centres, used for lower-level 'enemies' as a prison, execution centre or staging ground for more important prisoners who were then moved on to Tuol Sleng.¹¹

Both Choeung Ek and Po Tonle are sites dominated by stupas which house some of the remains of those killed on site. A stupa is a Buddhist building designed to house the remains of the dead or mark grave sites. It has a dual purpose, in memorialising the dead as well as guiding the living towards enlightenment¹² through the use of a rich and complex symbolism which connects the physical world with the divine.¹³ Although not all genocide memorials in Cambodia include stupas, they are not uncommon, particularly in larger regional memorials.

Methods

To facilitate the focus on the human remains themselves, a combination of qualitative methods of data collection was employed, including non-reactive participant-observation, field notes and interviews. Participant-observation was combined with an examination of physical traces,¹⁴ such as patterns of wear and the creation of paths on the grass surrounding the memorial, the presence or absence of rust on the locks or dust on the windows, whether the porch had been swept and if there were signs of disturbance or predation. This method complements Ingold's argument regarding the importance of materials and their analysis.¹⁵ My examination of the sites was supported by engagement with the forensic literature available on the Cambodian genocide.

Participant-observation has been used successfully in a variety of contexts and is particularly useful in situations where the researcher wishes to observe without reactivity, thus eliminating the possibility of observation impacting on the responses of the observed.¹⁶ At busy sites, such as Choeung Ek, I was able to mingle easily with the crowds of tourists, interacting with the site similarly to other visitors. However, at less-visited sites, a foreigner was a rarity, and my presence attracted attention. Non-reactive observation was impossible, as people sought to engage with me and find out my reason for visiting. This initiated informal conversations and interviews about the sites which became a valuable source of information about how Cambodians understood and interacted with the remains on display.

All interactions occurred through my interpreter, a Cambodian of Chinese-Khmer descent and a survivor of the genocide. His role was crucial in navigating the potentially fraught negotiations surrounding access to and explanations of the sites visited. Interviewing and interacting with people through an intermediary is rife with the potential for conflict and misunderstanding, a potential elevated when discussing sensitive issues.¹⁷ Each interview or research interaction became an exercise in interpreting both the words being relayed to me as well as the body language and interactions between two Khmer participants. This raises significant questions regarding the intellectual property and creation of knowledge within the research context,¹⁸ and, as the research progressed, my interpreter became more a collaborator and a key informant. My discussions were recorded in these instances with field notes, taken with the permission of participants.

The interactions were initiated by my interpreter, who often had to ask for directions to the memorial. This led to questions about why I was visiting and what I was interested in. The interviews were therefore unstructured, with the conversation revolving around how often they visited and whom they visited. Sometimes they chose to tell, unprompted, of their experiences under the regime. I asked questions about how the memorials were preserved, when they were developed and what visitors thought of the remains.

During conversation it was not uncommon for Cambodians to pick up the remains at memorials to show me, to rebalance the precariously stacked pile of bones, to tidy up and pick pieces up which were disturbed by small animals or children, or to ask me questions about them. These interactions, with both the living and the dead, facilitated a closer examination of the remains as they were turned and inspected by locals.

Displaying human remains: the dead in museums and memorials

The relative absence of discussion of the remains themselves as material or physical artefacts in most non-forensic examinations of the Cambodian genocide stands in contrast to analyses of other artefacts or representations of the dead, such as the photographs at Tuol Sleng or the buildings and structures associated with the genocide.¹⁹ Where the remains are discussed, they are positioned as either the results or remnants of other actions, such as executions or exhumations²⁰ or as part of an evidential or discursive narrative regarding the genocide.²¹ They are ignored as artefacts or objects which may be subjected to the same level of analysis as the architecture of buildings, or composition and display of photographs.

I suggest that there are two contributing factors to this silence. First, those outside the fields of physical or forensic anthropology may lack the knowledge, vocabulary or analytic frame regarding the remains, or be unfamiliar with either biological or forensic analysis. This unfamiliarity can result in unfortunate mistakes where remains are analysed where claims made are later contradicted by forensic analysis.²² This serves as an illustration of the gap in knowledge between disciplines and the desirability of engaging with a broader range of literature, particularly if

human remains are to be given the attention they deserve as objects of analysis. This is particularly evident when such works are compared to examples where human remains are analysed in a similar way to other artefacts.²³ The combination of physical anthropology and more social scientific-based analyses provides a nuanced reading of the remains as material objects.

A second contributing factor to this omission, which is strongly linked to the first, is the unease provoked by confrontation with the display of human remains. The sources of this unease appear to be twofold. The unease is caused by understanding the remains as symbolically constituting people, or subjects. Indeed, some explicitly reject any idea of the human remains as objects:

Burial rites and the appropriate treatment of the dead vary between groups, cultures and nations. Nevertheless, one common theme which transcends all groups is an inherent respect for the living which transfers to the dead as they too were once living individuals. This characteristic alone renders human remains in a class of their own, requiring something more than including them in the general category of objects within museum collections.²⁴

The display of remains renders those displayed passive objects of examination rather than active subjects. But in rejecting the existence of the remains as physical objects, their materiality vanishes into a theoretical debate surrounding the establishment of their subjectivity, humanity and identity.²⁵ In a related point, the unease of the display of the remains may be related to perceptions of the displays contravening socio-cultural taboos and practices related to the treatment of the dead.²⁶ This is problematic, given the wide variety of cultural differences in how the dead are managed, and reflects the power of the unconscious or emotional responses to the dead experienced by researchers, which are largely governed by their own subject positions.

The strong connection between personhood and identification reflected in the above means that the remains themselves vanish as independent objects of analysis, their materiality elided. However, this masks the humanity of the remains themselves – a human bone can only ever be produced by a human and, therefore, a person – which is rooted in their physical or material existence, within their objectivity.²⁷

One area of research wherein the display of human remains has been debated is that of museology, and many of the themes here expressed have been carried over into discussions regarding the memorialisation of genocide. Jenkins has documented the debate over the display of human remains as it has played out in British museums, identifying the crux of the problem for some of her respondents as the separation between the 'scientific' and 'non-scientific' outlook. Specifically, the depersonalisation and objectification, an intrinsic part of scientific observation of human remains, is problematic because it reduces the bones to the status of objects.²⁸ Further criticism is made of the common practice of writing numbers on the bones of skeletons, designed to enable the re-association of skeletal elements from one individual should they become separated. This is seen as contributing

to the dehumanisation of the remains by labelling them as specimens rather than people.²⁹ This distaste for the more scientific treatment of remains is echoed by Linke, who, focusing on the *Body Worlds* exhibit, argues that the anatomical display of the plastinated corpses allows scientific objectivity to overrule empathy, linking them strongly to the use of human bodies and the related dehumanisation of victims of 1930s and 1940s Fascist Germany.³⁰ Presenting the corpses as anonymous and as specimens separates them from their own history and from a sense of shared humanity by the observers. This is problematic because it stymies attempts to question the provenance of the remains or to discuss the ethics of displaying them at all. The dead are denied personhood, and the identity of being human subjects.³¹

Personhood, in such an analysis, is predicated on the ways the remains are displayed, rather than the remains themselves. If they are presented scientifically or forensically, as suggested above, personhood recedes. Even displays which include information about the individual displayed, which provide a scaffold for the creation of narrative and meaning based on the available skeletal elements, are viewed ambivalently.³²

This suggests that it is not only the objective display of remains which is unsettling, or even the lack of information about the individual which is depersonalising, but, rather, the lack of identification, the anonymity of the displays, which unsettles and lies at the root of the perception of depersonalisation. Moon argues explicitly that the practice of identification 'can be seen to restore personhood in death.'³³ Though referring to contexts of war or genocide, the principle expressed seems applicable to the display of human remains more broadly.

This approach is problematic for two reasons. First, linking the notion of personhood and, by extension, humanity, to identification potentially renders the unidentifiable non-persons.³⁴ I would suggest that personhood exists separately from the ability to be identified as a specific individual. Second, it centres the perception and allocation of personhood on the observers, who require the identification of remains in order to recognise their personhood, instead of the remains, and therefore the dead, themselves. A recognition of common humanity is certainly an important part of triggering empathy and understanding of events. It is this recognition which makes the experience of viewing the portraits at Tuol Sleng so powerful – that people, with emotions, histories and families, were indisputably there, and then not.³⁵ We can interpret these pictures, partly because we know how the story ends.³⁶ As humans, we recognise and can empathise with emotions expressed by those in the photographs.³⁷ But this is only one means of recognition. A human bone or skeleton remains human even if those viewing it do not see it as such. The emphasis on identification, and the connection of anonymity with disrespect or dehumanisation, are functions of a social or cultural system prioritising the individualisation and identification of people as a precursor to humanity. It is not the only way of responding to the dead.

By shifting our focus towards the remains themselves and abandoning our need for identification, we are able to recognise their value as pieces of evidence as well as people, independently of the social trappings of individualised, known identities. This approach complements that of forensic scientists and medical personnel

in their professional interactions with the dead. While objectivity is desirable, such scientists do not remain completely detached. Instead, the basic dignity and humanity of the remains is preserved, even when the remains are anonymous. This is reflected in the dualism experienced by those working forensically or medically with the dead. The human body itself becomes the focus rather than a human being.

This facilitates a process of analysis by which the dead are ‘symbolically rehabilitate[d] ... to the annals of the living’³⁸ – the dead speak against their deaths and the crimes committed against them precisely through this impersonal process. But this distancing does not imply a lack of respect or a depersonalisation of the individuals involved. And, indeed, it is imperfect.³⁹ When we consider the display of human remains in genocide memorials, most displays are of unidentifiable human remains: commingled or individualised skeletal remains, cremains, or the ashes of victims who had been cremated, or bodies encased in lime. The only identifiable dead on display are those found in photographs. As noted above, the unease often expressed in displaying the dead seems to lie in their apparent depersonalisation, which is tied to their anonymity. A skeleton appears anonymous. Personhood becomes transitory. It ceases to be at the point at which remains are easily unrecognisable as an identifiable individual to a casual observer and, as such, is not inherent in the remains themselves.⁴⁰ Understanding personhood to be situated within the capacity to recognise an individual means that the process of skeletonisation renders human remains not only anonymous, but non-people.⁴¹

The discussion above briefly elucidates some of the reservations regarding the display of human remains, primarily in a museum context, and suggests that criticisms of such displays as disrespectful due to the apparent depersonalisation of the remains is not the only response to such displays. I argue that predicating respect, humanisation and dignity upon the possibility for identification renders the agency and dignity of the dead dependent upon external viewers. If we instead accept the relative anonymity of the remains as part of their material state, we can then focus on what the remains themselves tell us.

Genocide memorials and the use of the dead

I have argued that discussions of the human remains as material objects are often missing in analyses of genocide memorials. What discussions did occur tended to focus on the debates over the appropriateness of such displays. In the following sections I will analyse the use of the remains in two genocide memorials in Cambodia, placing the materiality of the remains at the centre of analysis. In so doing, I will argue two things. First, that through their presence, the human cost of the genocide is made clear because of the presence of those victims. And second, that their presence is not necessarily a display. Instead, it is an essential part of connecting the living with the dead in Cambodia and a healing process for Cambodians who visit and interact with the remains as part of a grieving and memorialisation process. As physical artefacts and remains of people, they represent a connection to those who were lost without trace and, therefore, are both evidence and people.

Genocide memorials face a daunting dual purpose. They seek to educate visitors in order to keep the memory of the events alive, in the hope that they will not be repeated, and, in so doing, endeavour to prevent the dead from being forgotten. Williams suggests that in so doing they differ from museums in that they bear a specific narrative, distinct from the more neutral presentation of stories extant in many museums.⁴² What the contents of such sites are, in and of themselves, is subsumed into a greater contextual narrative.

This lack of independent meaning can give rise to criticisms that some genocide memorials, including Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, are vehicles of propaganda rather than sites of remembrance.⁴³ Both sites have come to stand for the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime in general.⁴⁴

This potentially political basis of memorials adds weight to arguments that the inclusion of human remains in memorials is disrespectful and inappropriate. There are cases of the display of human biomatter, such as fingernails, human hair or deformed fetuses (for example at the Hiroshima Peace Museum or the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh), or ashes (for example at Majdanek and Auschwitz), but many memorial designs have shied away from their inclusion and display on the grounds that such displays are offensive to the memory of the dead.⁴⁵ Some such concerns were echoed in the Cambodian case, where it has been argued that the displays re-victimise the victims and offend religious sensibilities.⁴⁶

The presence of human remains in genocide memorials in Cambodia suggests that such objections are rooted in specific social and cultural interpretations of the remains themselves. Particularly interesting are the assumptions that the dead, and thus the remains, have no agency as material items. As such, their display is offensive because their meaning is appropriated by the context in which they are displayed. This implies that the human remains are the property of the perpetrators rather than of the victims and that, in displaying them, memorials give greater space to the perpetrators than to the victims. Such a perspective again neglects the materiality of the remains, which, as suggested previously, retain their humanity and personhood regardless of treatment post mortem. The centring of the victims of genocide through their remains depends on the recognition of such remains as being not only human, but people. This involves an extension from a more common narrative of the remains functioning as evidence of an event.⁴⁷ The remains play a significant role in both the legal processes of justice and reconciliation⁴⁸ and the social processes of memorialisation and education. This has become increasingly important in the Cambodian context, as younger generations, without living memory of the genocide, may struggle to comprehend the scale or impact of the violence.⁴⁹

The genocide memorials of Choeung Ek and Po Tonle provide contrasting examples within the Cambodian context which demonstrate the different uses of human remains which are centred in a memorial. Specifically, they demonstrate the human cost of the genocide by centring the victims materially in the memorial and they provide an ongoing link between the living and the dead which maintains the memory of the dead and their experiences.

Choeung Ek: the human cost of genocide

Choeung Ek has been included in this article as an example of a site which serves a dual purpose: as a site for Cambodians to mourn their dead,⁵⁰ and as a site designed and preserved as primary evidence of the occurrence of the genocide. Second, it is an important tourist attraction in Phnom Penh. Critically, unlike other memorials in Cambodia, Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng were conceived of, designed and built as 'genocide museums' – attracting tourists and disseminating a specific political message were not coincidental, but were primary motivators in their development.⁵¹ In this section I will focus on Choeung Ek's role as a tourist attraction and educational tool.

Previously, both Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng were notable for their lack of information about individual experiences.⁵² Visitors can now receive an audio tour which gives a sense of individual experiences and stories, but the tours still contribute to a sense of the sites as universal. Visitors can receive an education about the genocide and then move on, thus potentially contributing to a culture of 'dark tourism'.⁵³ Williams explicitly suggests that many international visitors are attracted to the sites because of the opportunity afforded to experience, vicariously, death:

The idea that (for international visitors especially) the sites support a personal 'I was there' claim means that visitors will appropriate the aura of death for their own experience.⁵⁴

Such a claim aligns with the largely refuted claim that 'dark tourists' are motivated by a sense of voyeurism rather than a more profound respect.⁵⁵ But tourists may also be motivated by a desire to experience death, which is a universal human experience which has become largely medicalised, institutionalised and invisible in the global North, the source of many such visitors.⁵⁶

The audio tour available at Choeung Ek is partially designed to make death more visible for visitors – important for a site which would otherwise be a bewildering maze of hollows in the ground, paths and occasional bones on the surface. The tour guides visitors past many of the main landmarks, explaining their significance and purpose. It also dictates the pace at which visitors move through the site, cutting them off from extraneous noises and contributing to the sense that Choeung Ek is not part of a local landscape. Rather, it exists out of time and place. The visitor is untouched by the sound of children playing in a nearby school, or by the sound of a farmer's radio as he works nearby.

The site and tour are designed to revolve around the stupa, which is visible from every part of the site. The audio guide directs visitors around to different mass graves, pointing out places where human remains are visible. Tyner notes that such remains are occasionally moved to ensure more prominent display – their material existence and presence is an essential part of what might be termed the Choeung Ek experience.⁵⁷ Their presence speaks to the further presence of other, non-exhumed bodies. The connection between the present-and-visible and

the present-but-invisible dead is made clear through the direction of the visitors' gaze towards the remains themselves, a connection replicated across the country – the omnipresent invisible dead of Cambodia.⁵⁸ Their presence is revealed through the exposure of some of their remains, and their use in the Choeung Ek memorial.

I have argued above that the use of human remains suggests that we should reject the association of personhood with the ability to identify a specific individual. Choeung Ek, and other sites in Cambodia, support this because the remains are frequently commingled and disarticulated. As Guyer comments on the human remains displayed in Rwandan genocide memorials:

These collections are not made up of individual corpses identified and recovered by the living; rather, they are made up of hundreds, even thousands, of bones categorized according to type. If to remember the dead as individuals (to restore names and faces) – in the name of recovered dignity and propriety – is to *fail* to remember the very specific violence that attends genocide as violence against a population, to remember the dead through the sheer anonymity of these bones means that no one is or can be remembered. A pile of unrelated bones or a shelf of carefully arranged skulls does not commemorate a person.⁵⁹

In some senses Guyer is correct. A mass of skulls does not commemorate a specific, named individual. But it does strongly convey the loss of a people, the human cost of genocide. And, upon closer examination, each skull or bone does display individuality. I would argue that this is not an either/or situation as posited above. As I rejected identification as a prerequisite for personhood, so too do I reject the idea that a display of bones reduces the humanity of those displayed. This is supported both by an understanding of the role of the dead in some Buddhist traditions, in which the bodies are constructed and treated as objects and not persons,⁶⁰ and Bennett's analysis of the Cambodian contexts explicitly, which suggests that the use of publicly accessible stupas, and the visible display of remains, is unproblematic.⁶¹

Further, the argument that the mass display of artefacts reduces the humanity of those included in the display is not extended to other examples, such as the portraits of Tuol Sleng. These are described as overwhelming in their multitude, providing an agonising experience as the viewer attempts to acknowledge each individually, but is ultimately defeated by the task.⁶² The humanity of the subjects of the portraits is not questioned – it is the viewer who is left inadequate. The same conclusion is not drawn of confrontation with human remains. Memorials with human remains which do not individualise the victims are understood to memorialise the genocide as an act, grouping all of its victims together, rather than allowing individuals to speak out – a 'shockingly nonanthropomorphic tribute to the dead'.⁶³ Yet the interactions described with the dead in the Rwandan context do not bear this out. Gourevitch speaks of the contradictory compulsions of wanting to look at and look away from the remains. Further, he feels at a loss to identify a 'meaningful response':

revulsion, alarm, sorrow, grief, shame, incomprehension, sure, but nothing truly meaningful. I just looked, and I took photographs, because I wondered whether I

could really see what I was seeing while I saw it, and I wanted an excuse to look a bit more closely.⁶⁴

This suggests that the failure to acknowledge the humanity of the remains as they are presented, en masse and anonymously, rests within the observer, not the observed. In placing the remains themselves at the centre of the memorial, the material nature of humanity is made clear through the material essence of individuals.⁶⁵ It is for the observer to establish a frame of reference through which such remains can be viewed. The narrative presented at Choeung Ek, which guides visitors to the remains and contextualises the site, allows for the development of this frame of reference. This, combined with the established itinerary of a visit to Tuol Sleng, enabling the viewing of the portraits, followed by Choeung Ek, allows visitors to establish a narrative which personalises the victims and the remains. They see the photographs of the victims and hear their stories. They then visit their resting place.

Po Tonle: connecting the living with the dead

Po Tonle is located on the Bassac River in Kandal Province. During the Khmer Rouge regime, it was used as a site of execution for the local area. Fifty-five mass graves were identified in the immediate vicinity, and 35,027 skulls were exhumed.⁶⁶ These skulls, along with other remains, have been relocated into a squat, concrete stupa built on the site of one of the graves. The stupa was built in 1989, with funds raised by the survivor of one of the local Chinese-Khmer families. It is surrounded by a tiled veranda, with some picnic tables and chairs, and offerings placed at the locked doors. A phone number is engraved above one of the doors. A call to that number resulted in the arrival of one of the local commune's leaders, who holds the key permanently, to allow local people access to the stupa and the remains.

Po Tonle is discussed here as an example of the way that human remains are used to bridge a gap between the living and the dead in Cambodia. Analysed against the background of a broader discussion of the treatment of the dead in Cambodia, I suggest that the dislocated and disrupted nature of social relations between living and dead which resulted from the Khmer Rouge regime has resulted in an increased importance of the human remains themselves as a material connection and reminder of those who were killed or lost.

The use of human remains in memorials in Cambodia has been debated because of the perceived disrespect shown to the dead by such practices, which represent a radical departure from Khmer Buddhist rituals. The traditional funerary rituals were forcibly discontinued during the Khmer Rouge regime as part of a broader programme of 'ritualcide' which 'disrupted people's participation in cosmic ordering', generating a 'cosmic betrayal'.⁶⁷ This spiritual dislocation and forcible separation from protective spirits and ancestor spirits accompanied the physical sufferings inflicted on the Cambodian population⁶⁸ and contributed to ongoing trauma subsequent to the regime as people sought to re-establish contact with these spirits.

Traditional Cambodian relations with the dead were structured around two significant, and interrelated aspects: the quality of the mental state at the moment of

death and the location and manner of the death itself, which combine to determine whether a person experiences a good or bad death. The moment of death should be peaceful and accepting, and 'the mirror opposite condition of violent and agitated frightful terror'.⁶⁹ Achieved through the loving support of family at the moment of death, this is contrasted to those who die violently, tragically, unjustly or out of home, who are understood to experience difficulties in making the transition to the next life.⁷⁰ To overcome the difficulties and torments experienced by the dead, the living engage in the transfer of merit through selfless giving of offerings and donations. The karmic benefit of these actions is shared by the dead, alleviating their torments and assisting in their transition.⁷¹ The Khmer Rouge disrupted all such practices. The manner of many deaths was violent, fearful and without spiritual comfort and guidance. People died away from home, without the comfort of family, and many of the dead were spiritually cast into the wilderness, becoming *kmoac*, ghosts who haunt the living.⁷²

The regime's dispersal of the population and the resultant death toll presented significant challenges to Cambodians in the management of the dead. First, there was the practical challenge of dealing with the vast number of corpses which littered the country and which were found in mass graves.⁷³ Second, there was the spiritual challenge of appeasing and assuaging the *kmoac*'s emotional states. Resolving these issues was necessary to facilitate the emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of the living.

Bennett's work is illuminating in explaining how the spiritual and physical labour associated with the dead has combined in Cambodia. The nature of this labour evolved over time, reflecting the evolution of the relationship between the living and dead. But the very materiality of the dead provoked not only spiritual but also physical problems for the living. While during the regime the dead were relatively common and Bennett's informants spoke of sleeping among the dead and the associated smells and sights, after the regime the presence of the dead became increasingly problematic.⁷⁴ This was partly due to the increase in spiritual and emotional disturbances caused by the dead because of the manner of their deaths, and the lack of appropriate rituals to assist in their detachment from the world of the living.⁷⁵ It was also because of the difficulty in managing the impact of decomposition and the material presence of the dead when the living attempted to rebuild their lives.

The importance of managing the material dead cannot be ignored, particularly in cases of mass death or genocide. Their location, identification and return to their place of belonging is often framed as being an important step in the process of healing.⁷⁶ In the case of Cambodia, the physical return of the dead to their families was impossible, so survivors confronted the task of living among the dead as best they could. This involved disposing of the material remains by collecting them as directed by the government and placing them in small huts, by burying them or by burning them, with or without ceremonies.⁷⁷ This physical management was not a single event. The decomposing bodies impacted on entire ecosystems and entered the food chain, first poisoning and then fertilising the ground in which they lay.⁷⁸ Their bones began to be used as medicine, their skulls as toys, drums and amulets.⁷⁹ Graves were looted for valuables.⁸⁰ The materiality of the dead did not significantly

alter, in that they remained present, though the nature of their physical presence shifted over time. The meaning of their presence changed, based on the spiritual relationships forged between the living and the dead, to one of mutual benefit.⁸¹ It is not, then, that the material remains ceased to be important, but, rather, that their meaning changed as they are integrated into daily life.

Po Tonle provides an example of the ways that the material remains provide a link between the living and the dead. The main focus of the site is the stupa which houses the remains. The remains are accessible on request, though they are not explicitly displayed and the stupa is kept locked. When the door is opened, the remains are in a shelved column, divided between skulls and post-cranial elements. Streamers and paper have been glued to the glass, obscuring the view of the remains. The column can be opened, in common with many other memorials across Cambodia, and the remains handled. More remains can be added to the memorials as they are found. Lamps and offerings are at the door and on the floor in front of the remains.

The distinction between present and accessible, and being displayed, is an important one to consider when reflecting on the way that this site is used by locals. That it is visited regularly is indicated by the presence of permanent picnic tables and chairs, as well as permanent toilets. There were visible tracks in the grass from place to place on the site, showing that people regularly visited the smaller family shrines near the stupa. And the engraving of the phone number, which was answered and for someone to be available to unlock the stupa, speaks to the commitment of the local community to the maintenance and use of this site for memorialisation – a contrast to some other sites.⁸² On 20 May, the Day of Paying Tribute to the Spirits of the Deceased (formerly the Day of Maintaining Rage),⁸³ government representatives visit. Grave offerings are made at Khmer New Year, and again on Pchum Ben (Ancestor's Day). But the site is used all year round.

As a local site, it is defined by the experiences and stories of the people who visit. These stories are held and related by the local commune leader, who holds the key to the stupa. He sees it as his duty to tend the stupa, opening it for the visitors who come most days, and asking 'who have you come for?' Part of his job as 'keeper' of the site is to also hold the stories, carry them with him and then tell them forward. Thus, even when talking about things he did not personally see, he bears witness to events, contributing to a rich national narrative made up of individual stories.

The remains themselves are an integral part of these stories and experiences because people local to this site, who lived here throughout the regime, knew what occurred when music was played late at night and boats were banned from the river and people from the fields. They also heard the screams of victims. People do not know for certain that their loved ones are here, although it was claimed that some of the wealthier Chinese victims were identified by family members upon exhumation through their dentition. But they do know that their family members were living locally at the time they were taken, and that this is the largest local killing field.

The human remains and their visibility are a central part of visiting the site. It would be possible to visit the site and not see the remains, to remain outside and make offerings at a nearby shrine. But people choose to enter the stupa and engage with the remains. For those visiting, the remains' lack of identification makes it

possible for them to stand in the place of those who were lost. The accessibility of human remains in this context is, I would suggest, an important part of the memorialisation and grieving process for locals. Here the remains stand as evidence that the genocide occurred, but they are also tangible objects which show that the victims were not entirely destroyed. They still exist, as individuals and people, and can be mourned. The stupa and the remains provide a focus for grief.

The suggestion that anonymous remains can come to symbolise the general dead, serving specific political purposes, is not new.⁸⁴ But they can also come to represent specific individuals, especially in contexts where there is the possibility that the remains are, in fact, those of the individual lost. Mbembe hints at some of this tension:

What is striking is the tension between the petrification of the bones and their strange coolness on one hand, and on the other, their stubborn will to mean, to signify, something.⁸⁵

We see here the return to a focus on the very materiality of the remains, albeit with an assignation of agency and will. The remains have specific physical properties – the ones at Po Tonle are dusty and dry, crumbly, and the stupa smells of earth, with a slightly acrid scent of decay coming from some of the offerings. But the meaning of the remains, in this context at least, is clear. They are people, who are being individually and explicitly mourned. Their materiality proves the existence of those lost in both their generality and their specificity.

Conclusion: human remains as people

Many of the objections raised to the display of human remains in museums and memorials are based on the premise that such displays depersonalise and disrespect the dead. The main basis of this depersonalisation is the lack of identification, apparent anonymity and ‘objectivity’ of displays, which renders the remains forever object rather than subject. I have suggested that such analyses fail to account for the motivations of scientific and forensic research, and that respect and personhood need not, indeed can not, be situated wholly in the process of identification.

I argue that a different approach to human remains should be adopted which situates their meaning in themselves, rather than the interpretations of observers. The approach facilitates the understanding of the remains as individual, if unidentifiable, people, rejecting explicitly the connection between identification and personhood. Personhood is therefore predicated on the humanity of the remains, not their identity. It also means acknowledging the physical presence of human remains and the ways that this presence dictates the movements and behaviour of the living. Their materiality is a central part of their being and, by extension, central to the existence of the living people they were. Predicating respect, personhood and dignity upon the possibility for identification renders the agency and dignity of the dead dependent upon external viewers. The presence of the remains ensures that their personhood and dignity is preserved independently of context.

This is reflected in the analyses of Choeung Ek and Po Tonle. Sites which illustrate different meanings and roles, they demonstrate different ways that human remains are used in memorials. In both cases, a distinction is made between the display of remains and the presence of remains which are accessible. Although at Choeung Ek displays of human remains are curated to illustrate a particular narrative, this occurs within a complex relationship between living and dead at the site, which Bennett argues is one of mutual aid and benefit.⁸⁶ And access to the remains as part of this relationship is common across Cambodia, demonstrated also at Po Tonle. Specifically, both demonstrate the human cost of the genocide by centring the victims materially in the memorial and they provide an ongoing link between the living and the dead which maintains the memory of the dead and their experiences.

Perceptions that displaying the dead is disrespectful are largely a product of a specific social and cultural milieu which, when applied to different contexts, problematises the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead and silences the dead themselves. Allowing our analytical gaze to slide over the remains disengages us from the individuals they are, and instead prioritises the narratives presented by the contexts in which they are located. Bringing our focus back to the remains themselves develops an alternative narrative. If we are unable to hear or read that narrative, or find it too difficult to engage with, the fault lies in ourselves as observers, not the remains. I am therefore arguing for a move away from the role of the observer in defining humanity and personhood. The human remains are people, regardless of recognition or location.

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