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## **Introducing the TEX-KR project: Exploring Cambodia's textile material culture of conflict**

The TEX-KR project explores textile production and dress practices in Cambodia from 1970 to the mid-1980s, especially examining the years of the Khmer Rouge totalitarian regime. The dictatorship claimed nearly two million lives between 1975 and 1979, with devastating results on textile artisanal practices.

This project asks: how to devise the non-military history of the Cambodian civil war and dictatorship through textiles, dealing with limited sources, testimonies and objects? This paper will present the scope of TEX-KR, which aims to reconstruct a fragmentary material history that encompasses lost practices, missing textiles and found artefacts as crucial evidence of Cambodia's late twentieth-century history of conflict.

TEX-KR is a Horizon 2020 Marie Curie project led between Cambodia and the Center for Textile Research at the University of Copenhagen. The project is articulated around two phases, combining archival and historical study and fieldwork. The first phase examines the textile collection and archives at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. The second is centred around the garments which belonged to the victims of the Khmer Rouge prison site S-21, now Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, also in Phnom Penh.

A study of Cambodia's history of conflict throughout the twentieth century is required to outline the losses and challenges in domestic textile practices and production. Cambodia welcomes the indigenous species of *bombyx mori* silkworms, which produce a type of silk commonly called golden silk, recognisable for its bright yellow colour which washes away at the degumming stage to reveal a creamy white tone. Cocoons are processed by hand. One cocoon gives an average of four hundred metres of filaments, compared to a minimum of one thousand metres from the white mulberry silk cocoon in other parts of Asia.<sup>1</sup> Silkworm rearing and weaving have been activities grounded in villagers' lives on the side of farming.

In the Sangkum (independence) era in Cambodia from the 1950s until the late 1960s, silk weaving was a cottage industry mostly handled by women in villages.<sup>2</sup> Silk farmers yielded between twenty to fifty metric tonnes of yarn a year – importing the rest' for a national

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<sup>1</sup> The first semi-automated silk reeling machine was developed in 2019 by Aoral Silk Community. Sok Chan, 'Ancient Silk Farming Regains Growth with Proper Ecosystem.'

<sup>2</sup> Dupaigne, 'L'élevage des vers à soie au Cambodge,' 1-29.

consumption of eighty tonnes.<sup>3</sup> Weavers of Khmer and Cham ethnicity mastered a wide range of techniques to produce colourful lengths of silk cloth mainly worn as ceremonial hip wraps called *sampot*. The most recognisable and renowned weaving technique in Cambodia is the polychromic weft ikat technique called *hol*, in which weft silk threads are tied and dyed in successive baths of colours following specific motifs before being woven as a twill on the loom.

By 1970, Cambodia plunged into civil war. Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime turned the country into a communist peasant dictatorship, ruled with economic quasi-autarky. The Khmer Rouge also orchestrated several waves of bloody purges against their political opponents and ethnic minorities in the name of national purification. With rural populations being displaced and arable land requisitioned for collectivised rice farming, artisanal weaving and fibre production mostly stopped.

The unfitted black cotton pajamas inspired by common peasant garb became the national uniform as an embodiment of the new proletarian and collective order. Men, women and children enrolled in Khmer Rouge militias became an anonymous, gender-neutral army in black clothes. They often wore a *kadep* (cap) inspired by Chinese Communist Party caps, black sandals made from rubber tyres and a *krama* gingham cotton scarf.<sup>4</sup> Khaki army fatigues were also common as a military uniform. The population was forbidden to wear colourful clothes and had to dye them in dark muted tones. More than 600,000 Cambodians, including ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese populations, fled the country.<sup>5</sup> About 350,000 people relocated to refugee camps at the Thai border or managed to cross the border to Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> More than 240,000 Cambodians relocated outside Southeast Asia permanently, especially in the United States, Europe and Australia.

To address this traumatic history, this project undertakes a multifaceted approach centring on memory, loss, and materiality to study sensitive textile histories and artefacts in a Cambodian context. The first phase traces the formation of the textile collection at the National Museum during the French protectorate to the early 1970s, the effects of the museum closure during the years of dictatorship in the late 1970s, and losses in the collection in the aftermath of the conflict in the 1980s. The National Museum of Cambodia was inaugurated in 1920 during the French protectorate. French artist and educator Georges Groslier (1887–1945) was

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Delvert, *Le paysan cambodgien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), 282-3 ; Cambodia Ministry of Commerce and ITC, *Cambodia National Silk Strategy* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Ministry of Commerce and ITC, 2016), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Muan and al., *Seams of Change*, 105-106.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 195.

<sup>6</sup> United States General Accounting Office, National Security and International Affairs Division, *Relief Efforts for Cambodian Camps Fact Sheet* (Washington: United States General Accounting Office, 1991), 2.

commissioned by the French Governor-General Albert Sarraut to organise a programme of training in the arts for Cambodian populations. He transformed the Royal Palace workshops into a school combined with a museum. Groslier created a school with six workshops: drawing and architecture, sculpture, woodworking and gold plating, foundry, silverware, and weaving. The silk weaving workshop was comprised of 20 young female weavers. Once trained, weavers could join the commercial endeavour called Les Corporations Cambodgiennes, which fulfilled orders for the museum shop and exported goods to the French metropole.

Led by French keepers until the appointment of Cambodian director Chea Thay Seng in 1966 and his successor Ly Vou Ong in 1973, the museum progressively gathered an important collection of Cambodian antiquities (stone, metal, wood and ceramics) from the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods, and numerous textiles.<sup>7</sup> The National Museum closed in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge seized power. It only reopened to the public on April 13, 1979, with its collections derelict.<sup>8</sup> Most of the pre-1975 museum's staff had died, resulting in a significant loss of knowledge about the museum's history and objects.

Between 1970 and the first inventory post-conflict in the 1990s, about two-thirds of the textile collection had disappeared, most likely due to environmental damages and looting.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, the museum has retained invaluable archival documents, especially dating from the French protectorate, in the form of paper acquisition files, catalogues, and inventories. Unlike statues in the collection, no photographs were attached to these records. The meticulous study of these paper cards reveals the metadata of the objects: their provenance when available, their purchase price in colonial piastre, date of acquisition, catalogue number, and storage location. The back of the cards shows dates of inventory check-ins by the successive curators until 1970 at the latest, as evidence of human care for these objects.

Before the dictatorship, there were 415 objects in the textile and costume collection, including 317 flat silk textiles in various styles and provenance such as scarves (*kanseng*) and different types of *sampot* (hip wraps): *sampot hol* (ikat), *charabap* (brocade) and *lboeuk* (supplementary-weft patterning). There were also 66 dance and theatre costumes and accessories, as well as 30 protective auspicious objects (handkerchiefs and chasubles in cotton cloth).

The museum only recovered 73 flat textiles and a dance and theatre costume collection of between thirty and forty pieces. What is left from the pre-Khmer Rouge collection consists of a

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<sup>7</sup> 'Control of the National Museum and Arts Administration was ceded by the French to the Cambodians on 9 August, 1951, and following Independence in 1953, the then Musée National de Phnom-Penh was the subject of Bilateral accords (7 November 1956). From 1956 to 1966, the museum continued to flourish under the direction of Madeleine Giteau, Conservatrice du Musée National.'

[http://www.cambodiamuseum.info/museum\\_history.html](http://www.cambodiamuseum.info/museum_history.html)

<sup>8</sup> National Museum of Cambodia, 'Museum History'

[https://www.cambodiamuseum.info/museum\\_history.html](https://www.cambodiamuseum.info/museum_history.html) [Accessed March 28, 2020]

<sup>9</sup> Khun Samen, and Touch Hab, 'Textiles in the Collection of the National Museum of Cambodia.'

large group of multicoloured *kiet plangi* (tie-dyed) headscarves made by Cham makers, and only two Khmer *sampot hol*. Seven ceremonial *sampot charabap* in silk and gold threads, some of them coming from the ancient Royal Palace of Udong, have been found post-conflict. There is also a small number of woven pieces produced by Cham weavers, which mix silk patterned *lboeuk* with bands of decorative brocaded gold threads. As such, examining the museum archival records provides crucial information about the missing and remaining objects alike. Reconstructing the original collection through archival material allows us to grasp the extent of the loss of textile history and heritage which was carefully produced, collected and documented for decades until the 1970s.

On the other side of this history of loss and destruction, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was established in late 1979 on the secret Khmer Rouge prison site S-21 in Phnom Penh, where about 18,000 prisoners were killed. Prisoners were meticulously photographed by the Khmer Rouge cadres upon incarceration. In a dehumanisation process, their forced confessions were taken, as well as their clothes. Male prisoners were left with their underwear while women could keep their shirts and sarong until their execution. Prisoners could earn clothes in return for specific tasks performed at the prison. One of the few survivors, Chum Mey, worked on fixing sewing machines at the prison and was granted some clothing.

As a result of these exactions, thousands of garments, textiles, and fragments were abandoned in the confines of the prison when the site was abandoned at the fall of the regime in April 1979. With the support of the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, 2018-2021, US textile conservator Julia Brennan implemented a textile conservation and training programme at the museum, in close collaboration with in-house conservator Kho Chenda. Approximately 3,000 pieces of clothing have been inventoried, photographed, and stored in a climate-controlled system. To this date, about a third has been treated. The museum now owns a textile archive available for further research, to shed light on the prisoners' identities, and more broadly, life under the Khmer Rouge.

Most of the clothing appears to be cotton, but the collection does include a significant quantity of synthetic, mostly polyester blend, 'parachute' nylon, and polyester knit. There are almost no manufacturer or tailor labels in any of the clothing. The bulk of the collection is comprised of elements of military uniforms in black and green fatigue and Chinese-style caps. A small selection of clothes showcases distinctive features, such as extensive mending, repairs, and patches, telling a history of hardship and survival. Certain garments such as shirts and t-shirts with printed motifs were typical of the pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodian daily attire in the 1970s, remnant of a Western-style influence with slim-fitting shapes. Further information can be drawn from establishing different categories of garments and materials within the textile

remains. As such, Western-style garments suggest that their owners were most likely urbanites who became prisoners in the early period of the regime in 1975-1976 before colourful clothing was banned further. Matching these objects with portraits of prisoners from the photo archives will help define common dress customs before 1975.

This research project also focuses on mending practices, by studying objects and fragments showing signs of human touch, and looking at their materials, marks and repairs. Several objects show patched pockets, patched fabrics as lining, stitching, mending, and signs of discolouration or overdyeing. For instance, this shirt is a remarkable example of adaptability and survival for a woman who most likely owned only this one piece of clothing. The lack of consistency in the repairs with different techniques, and choice of patched fabrics and threads certainly indicates that fabrics were scarce.

In addition, paper archives may provide additional information about prisoners who worked as weavers or textile factory workers before their incarceration. Interviews of retired staff who worked at the museum in the 1980s will help understand the state of these textile remains at the time and the history of their integration into the museum's collection. This second research phase at Tuol Sleng requires a multilevel approach, which aims to bring material and human perspectives on the Cambodian genocide. It considers the ways in which the textiles and clothing held at the genocide museum reflect the drastic cultural, material, and social changes imposed on Cambodian people in the late 1970s.

By examining two crucial archives held in institutions and historical sites in Phnom Penh, TEX-KR examines issues of human and material loss in relation to textiles. The loss and reclamation of these collections as by-products of the Khmer Rouge atrocities embody two complementary sides of this traumatic period of human, cultural, and artistic destruction. From these findings, the project could expand towards practice-based research in collaboration with weaving communities in Cambodia, to explore the survival of textile practices despite the major destructions brought by the 1970s. In a dynamic approach to cultural heritage, crafts are not static traditions but living practices in dialogue with historical artefacts in museum collections, which is a conversation I hope to open with the group today. Placing human experience at the centre of the research process helps to create the required space to welcome Cambodian individual narratives, from the memory of the Khmer Rouge regime victims and survivors to weavers, refugees and immigrants, and explore community relationships with past textile practices and artefacts.