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# TEX-KR project: From textile remains to lost practices, investigating the textile material culture of conflict of the Khmer Rouge regime

## Introduction

The question of loss and absence is inherent to the study of archaeological and historical textile artefacts and garments. Textile historian Mary Brooks has indeed argued that in dress collections, garments necessarily become “surrogate bodies evoking and memorialising the absent wearer” (Brooks 2017, 20). Archaeologist Elizabeth E. Peacock has stressed the intimate relationship between textile finds and human remains and the ethical issues associated with their treatment and study (Peacock 2007). These central debates in the field of textile studies take a specific meaning in the context of war, genocide, and forced migration. The TEX-KR project explores Cambodian textile crafts and dress practices from 1970 to the mid-1980s, especially examining the unprecedented disruptions brought by the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime. Facing lost lives, fragmentary material evidence, missing artefacts, and the disappearance of textile technical know-how, TEX-KR is a 20th-century-focused project that strongly resonates in its approach with the field of textile archaeology and contemporary conflict archaeology (Theune 2018). This project outlines a nuanced and precise understanding of what Cambodians wore in the years before the dictatorship, during, and after, and how the regime affected textile craft practices, fibre production, manufacturing, and trade. Over the last three decades, scholarly interest in the Khmer Rouge tyranny and its tremendous political, human, and social cost has gained prominence, while mostly overlooking its material facets (Chandler 1991; Kiernan 2008). On the other hand, textile literature has largely centred on the history, iconography, and technical specificities of Cambodian textiles before 1970 and after 1990

(Green 2003; 2008). However, during the 1970s, textile production and exchanges continued, even in limited and shifting forms. TEX-KR aims to redress this major knowledge gap through the study of material remains and lack thereof, to shed light on an essential aspect of Cambodian material culture, and expand current knowledge on the Khmer Rouge regime. This multidisciplinary study combines politics, archives, materiality, and theoretical perspectives on trauma, memory, and embodiment.

## Context

Textile crafts are ancestral practices that have been commonly carried by women in the household in Cambodia since at least the 13th century. In his eyewitness account *Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People*, Chinese diplomatic envoy Zhou Daguan, who had been sent to the court of Angkor, commented on dress customs among the elite and commoners, cotton cloth trade at the market, and weaving activities (Zhou and Harris 2007). Thereafter, silk and cotton weaving continued as a cottage industry, mainly for the domestic market. Silk textiles were used by both men and women to attend ceremonies such as Buddhist rituals and weddings. Cambodian silk textiles also gained international recognition. By the 17th century, these were considered prestige items traded within the Southeast Asian courts, especially by the Siamese, and offered as prized diplomatic gifts (fig. 1). Cambodia also became a leader in cotton production and exported in the region up to the mid-20th century. Until the 1970s, silk farmers yielded between 20 to 50 metric tonnes of yarn a year for a national consumption of 80 tonnes (Delvert 1994). Decades of political upheavals in the second half of



Fig. 1: *Sampot hol chawng kbun* (silk weft ikat hip wrap), catalogue number: E83, from King Mongkut of Siam to US President Franklin Pierce, around 1856 (Image: courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution)

the 20th century brought unprecedented disruptions to the practice of sericulture and artisanal weaving. By 1970, Cambodia plunged into civil war when General Lon Nol ousted prince Norodom Sihanouk and established the Khmer Republic. In January 1975, the Khmer Rouge marched over Phnom Penh and rose to power, changing the country's name into Democratic Kampuchea, and turning Cambodia into a nationalist revolutionary regime. Between 1975 and 1979, nearly 2,000,000 people died of bloody purges, armed conflicts, harsh treatment, hunger, and diseases (Chandler 1991). Cultural geographer James Tyner argued that “before the Khmer Rouge constructed their own communist spaces, they deliberately set out to *deconstruct*, or unmake previous spaces” (Tyner 2008, 110). In this deliberate process of “unmaking”, the Khmer Rouge controlled the dress practices of the population, forbidding people to wear colourful or festive attire (Narin et al. 2003).

The regime imposed a unisex national uniform comprised of unfitted black cotton pyjamas, inspired by the common peasant garb, worn with a red and white gingham *krama* (scarf), a Chinese-style *kadep* (cap), and black sandals made from rubber tyre (Berthon 2018) (fig. 2). Phnom Penh was deserted by its inhabitants, with the ruling party only keeping administrative headquarters, hospitals, and prisons open, including S21, the largest

secret central prison and torture centre in the country, through which transited about 18,000 people with only a handful of survivors (Chandler 1999).

A few textile factories remained active but were operated by new workers coming from outside the city. Simultaneously, the National Museum of Cambodia, founded in 1920 during the French protectorate, was closed and abandoned in 1975. Upon reopening in 1979, the institution had lost three quarters of its extensive silk textile and costume collection. Silk production and weaving practices were heavily affected by the destruction of mulberry tree fields, the dismantlement of villages, and the displacement of craftspeople in other provinces. More significantly, in the aftermath of the regime, local silk fibre production had fallen to an estimate of 0.8 metric tonnes a year, the lowest level ever recorded in the 20th century (Cambodia Ministry of Commerce and International Trade Center 2016). As a result of the continuous armed conflicts in the country, more than 600,000 Cambodians, including ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese populations, fled (Slocomb 2010). About 350,000 people relocated to refugee camps at the Thai border, or managed to cross the borders to Thailand and Vietnam, including weavers who tried to pursue their activity in displacement (US General Accounting Office, National Security and International Affairs Division 1991).

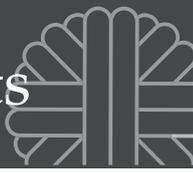


Fig. 2: Khmer rouge black peasant dress: a – Textile workers in a textile storage room; b – Women harvesting rice fields. Propaganda images, around 1976 (Image: *Kampuchea Democratique*, March 1976, Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Democratic Kampuchea)

### Project’s description and objectives

To address the project’s central theme of human, material, and technical destruction, TEX-KR turns to a diversity of finds whose significance advances the understanding of the living and surviving conditions of Cambodian people during the civil war and Khmer Rouge regime. The context of war and displacement entails the study of fragmentary evidence of textile activities, production, circulation, and consumption within Cambodia and in the refugee camps at the Thai border. As a result, material remains (clothes, textile fragments, paper documents, photographs, and tools) are scarce and require careful examination and interpretation to help reconstruct past making processes and textile uses. Issues of continuity, change and loss in textile production, weaving knowledge, and dress practices in Cambodia under the dictatorship are addressed through historical and ethnographic strategies that include archival, object and material-based studies, oral history, and practice-based approaches with weavers in Cambodia. This project is articulated around the study of two textile collections from the country’s leading cultural institutions and sites: the National Museum of Cambodia and Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. During the regime, nearly all of the National Museum staff had died, resulting in a tremendous loss of knowledge about the museum’s history and objects. By the 1980s, the textile collection formed during the

French colonisation, comprised in particular of an extensive number of intricate silk polychromic weft ikat (*sampot hol*), pictorial ikat (*pidan*), and brocaded pieces (*sampot chorebap*), had taken a heavy toll due to environmental damages, lack of conservation, and looting (Khun and Hab 2003).

The museum only recovered 73 flat textiles and about 30 royal dance and theatre costume items (fig. 3). In parallel, the S-21 prison became the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and memorial site in 1980

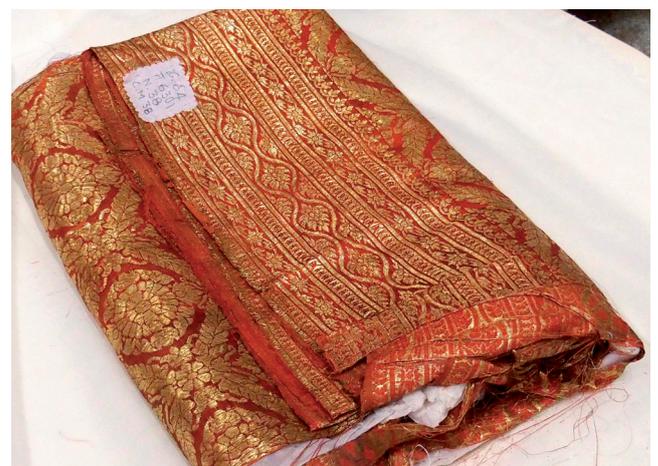


Fig. 3: *Sampot chorebap* (brocade), silk and gilt *filé*, acquired by the museum in 1921, Cha.64 (Image: Magali An Berthon, 2018, courtesy of the National Museum of Cambodia)

(Chandler 1999; Cambodia Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2020). Since 2018, about 3,000 prisoners' garments and fragments were found in situ and reclaimed during an ambitious textile conservation plan to be integrated with the museum's collection of photographs and paper archives (fig. 4). Comprised of a majority of military uniforms, caps, belts, male pants and shirts, and a range of more unusual civilian-owned clothes often heavily patched and mended, the objects found at Tuol Sleng tell a history of war, hardship, and survival. Looking in particular at signs of tears and repairs, as well as names stitched onto a few pieces, give invaluable clues to the identities of their owners, and point to the scarcity of material resources in that period. This material study may also inform the procedures and torments inflicted by the prison guards and the prisoners' strategies of survival. Given this, this project investigates the ways in which these collections – one missing, one found – are by-products of the Khmer Rouge atrocities, embodying two complementary sides of this traumatic period of human, cultural, and artistic destruction.

TEX-KR aims to provide an embodied sensory perspective to existing Cambodian genocide studies, in the footsteps of the most recent scholarship on the materiality of genocide (Caswell 2014). The project offers new ways of working with textile materials as part of cultural memory to make past connections, techniques, and practices visible and known. In the words of the Chief Conservator for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Jane E. Klinger, these clothes and textiles “tempered by trauma” carry several functions as historic markers, second skin for the missing and the dead, commemorative objects, evidence of hardship or survival with “the ability to invoke highly personal feelings in the viewer that inextricably link the tangible and historic” (Klinger 2017, 95–96). In a second phase, this archival and object-based research will support the development of practice-based strategies through visual documentation, interviews, and participatory methodologies to explore further the links between textile making, memory, loss, and cultural identity. Based on a selection of missing pieces' descriptions found in the National Museum's archives, Cambodian weavers and artists will be invited to develop new silk textiles to reconnect lost skills to contemporary forms of artisanal making. In a dynamic approach to cultural heritage, this project considers crafts not as static traditions but as living practices in dialogue with historical artefacts in museum collections. Placing human experience at the centre of the research



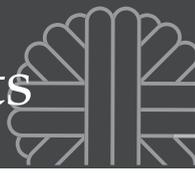
Fig. 4: Picture of a female prisoner on display in the permanent gallery of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, surrounded by other prison mugshots (Image: Magali An Berthon, 2020, courtesy of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum)

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 to explore community relationships with past textile practices and artefacts.

Ultimately, the project finds inspiration in the field of Transitional Justice in implementing research outputs and activities aiming to redress the dignity of victims of mass atrocities and foster dialogues between objects, histories, and women weaving communities through making (Rush 2014). TEX-KR develops an innovative sensory methodology incorporating materiality, emotions, and memory to study sensitive textile artefacts in a Cambodian context with the potential to inform other histories of conflict.

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