

COLLECTIONS CORNER

CONSERVATION OF A *PHOENIX* RAINCAPE FROM THE PHILIPPINES

As any collector knows, acquisition is just the first part of any collection's journey through place and time. Anything thereafter, from poor storage to the attacks of insects, and wear and tear from the hands of researchers, can affect its future and how long it remains recognisable, scientifically useful and a fitting tribute to its provenance. Good subsequent curation, therefore, requires active (and well recorded) intervention, not merely stasis.

In a book on the products of Philippine forests, Brown and Merrill (1920) noted for the palm *Phoenix hanceana* Naudin var. *philippinensis* Becc. (a synonym for *P. loureiri* Kunth var. *loureiri*; Barrow 1998) that "Locally its leaves are utilized in making a peculiar thatched raincoat, extensively used in the Batanes Islands. The leaflets are split into shreds and woven into an oblong mat, which is hood-like at one end. The long free ends of the shreds are arranged like thatch and very effectively shed even heavy rain."

A thatched raincoat, or more appropriately raincape, fitting this description from the Batanes Islands (north of Luzon) was donated to the Economic Botany Collections at Kew nearly seventy years later (Fig. 1). Long narrow bundles of the sundried leaves of *P. loureiri*, bound together with a white plastic 2-ply cord, are woven into a cape 79 cm in height, 41 cm in width, with a cap at the top, opening out to form a flat mat which covers the wearer's shoulders and back. A foundation rod of leafstalks of *Musa textilis* Née supports the edges and top of the cape, leaving the bottom fringed with the thatch. Gruezo and Fernando (1985) illustrated such a cape, and ascribed two local Ivatan names for it, *suot* and *vakol*. According to Hicks (2000, and pers. comm.) *suot* (which he transliterated as *soot*) refers to the characteristically hooded capes worn by women only (Fig. 2); men's capes are not hooded. Chavayan on Sabtang Island is the main place where raincapes are still made for daily usage (Hicks pers. comm.).

While Brown and Merrill (1920) may have found the raincape 'peculiar', they mentioned that leaves of *Livistona* spp. and *Nipa fruticans*

Wurmb were also used in Philippines to make raincoats. Furthermore, thatched coats (and hats) are known in British museum collections from Africa, South America and elsewhere in Asia as well (Hook et al. 2000). They differ in material and method of construction but share a common function and working principle, tending to be light, easy to put on and made from readily available materials. However, efficient as protection though they may be, coats made from plant material do have intrinsic conservation problems. As the plant fibres lose moisture, the artefact becomes overly dry, embrittled and vulnerable to physical damage.

However, when Kew's cape was examined, it was obvious that it had suffered from a different sort of damage: of the ten parallel rows of plastic

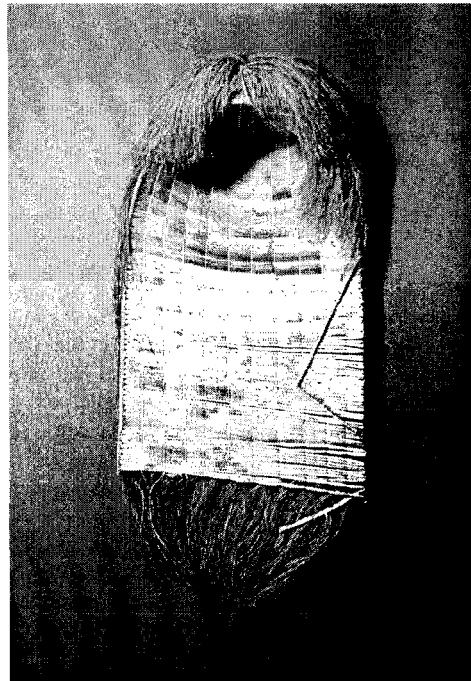


Fig. 1. Hooded raincape worn by women, Batanes Islands, Philippines, 1985, collected by W. S. Gruezo and S. Fernando, and donated by J. Dransfield (Kew EBC 75783). Prior to conservation. (A. McRobb, RBG Kew.)



Fig. 2. Woman wearing raincape, Chavayan, Sabtang Island, May 1998. (Nigel Hicks.)

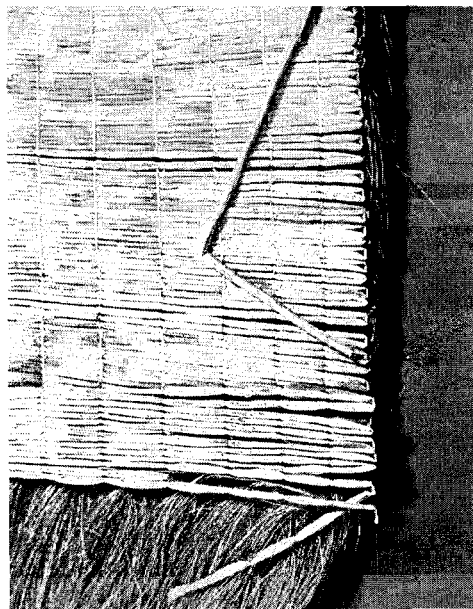


Fig. 3. Detail of raincape prior to conservation. The foundation rod of *Musa textilis* lies bent and broken across the cape. Contrast the leaf bundles of *Phoenix lourieri* at top left, that are still tightly bound where the plastic cord is intact, with the widening spaces between bundles at bottom right where the cord has been lost. (A. McRobb, RBG Kew.)

cord binding running down its length, only two (on the left; see Fig. 1) were intact. The other rows were abraded, possibly from the cape being worn, and missing in large areas, those on the furthest right suffering the most damage (detailed in Fig. 3). The bundles of shredded leaflets, which formed the thatch, were displaced where they were no longer supported by the cord and in danger of becoming completely detached. The foundation rod on this side had broken in three places and was only held together by an internal plastic cord, which was visible running through its core, rather like a spine. The rod had become detached from the coat here as if it had been pulled away from the main body of the cape. This in turn had probably led to the loss of the plastic binding, and the whole area had become weak, distorted and prone to further deterioration. In this sad condition, the cape was too vulnerable for handling or display. However, it was hoped that appropriate conservation treat-

ment could restore the original strength and shape.

The first task was to ease the bundles of shredded leaflets which formed the thatch back into their host leaves, where the loss of binding had allowed them to slip out of place. Once done, they were held with fine silk thread, so that after a morning's work the area of damage seemed to be a mass of silk ties. In truth the object looked worse than before conservation work had begun. However, this precautionary measure meant that the main rebinding could be undertaken without risk of further loss of plant fibre. Again, the rebinding was carried out using a silk thread, colour matched to the palm, following the wrapping technique used in the original manufacture of the cape. The silkiness and fineness of the thread eased the process, minimising the risk of damage to the embrittled leaves. Once this process was complete, the preliminary silk ties were removed, leaving the cape looking far neater and returned almost to its original dimensions.

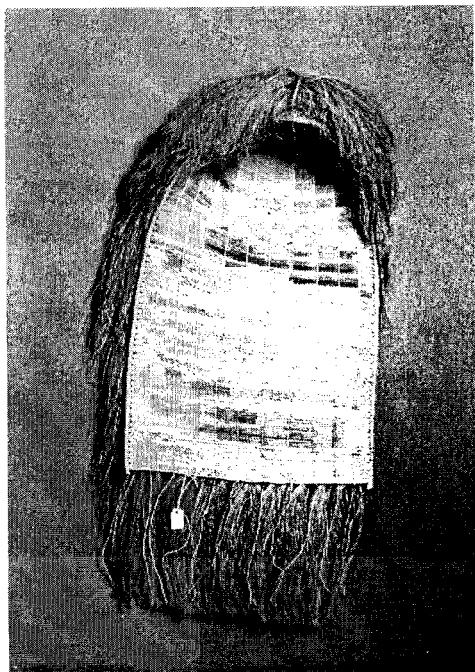


Fig. 4. The same raincape as in Fig. 1, after conservation. (A. McRobb, RBG Kew.)

At this stage, it was decided to replace the missing plastic cord with a thread that was not only of similar appearance but also soft enough not to cause any damage to the already vulnerable cape. A variety of substitutes were tried: commercially available plastic was too stiff, linen thread too thin, embroidery cotton too shiny. Even dental floss was tried but, predictably perhaps, was too waxy. The most suitable proved to be a white cotton piping cord (unmercerised) that could be divided into threads of the correct width and easily dyed to replicate the 'dirty' off-white of the existing aged plastic. This new thread was used to cover the silk binding and

re-bind the foundation rod back into place, following the indentations caused by the original missing plastic. With all the re-binding complete, it only remained for the breaks in the rod to be disguised using a covering of fine tissue paper. After about 45 hours of conservation work (detailed in a Conservation Record [April 2001] held by the Centre for Economic Botany), the cape was once again intact (Fig. 4) and strong enough to be worn—though in its new function as a museum object, this strength need not be put to the test. Put on display, the conserved raincape will testify to the versatility of the plant from which it was made, to the ingenuity of its makers—and to the funding and commitment required to curate it.

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