

Threads

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Threads and related objects, from fibers to cloth, have played a role in the history of anthropological theory and ethnographic writing. Since the mid-nineteenth century, research on and reference to these materials by social-cultural anthropologists and anthropological ancestors have illuminated key theoretical issues. In addition, the relative abundance or scarcity of these topics in the literature as well as the nature of research on thread and cloth all shed light on concerns that have motivated anthropological inquiry. A consideration of these issues also suggests reasons for increased interest in threads and cloth since the latter part of the twentieth century.

Simply defined, threads are the slender filaments formed by spinning together fibers. They have properties or qualities and associated meanings and uses that over time become more or less salient to the people involved, depending on the context. The fibers may have origins that are animal, vegetable, metal, or synthetic. Because the fibers are spun either to the left or the right, each single-ply thread has an S or Z twist, which has degrees of meaningfulness depending on who produces the thread. Multiple threads can be spun together, and any of the spun material increased in thickness to produce kindred objects associated with various social and cultural realms (e.g., the English-language terms “yarn,” “cord,” “rope,” “wire,” and “cable”). Threads, in turn, can become the fundamental materials for other methods of elaboration (e.g., weaving, knitting, sewing, plaiting, and twining) and the creation of other objects (e.g., cloth, baskets, mesh bags, mats, and cat’s cradle). An item such as cloth, in turn, might come off the loom laden with potential but still considered a “raw” material—able to be processed further for a particular functional role—or move almost immediately to a specific use (e.g., shawl, shroud, or curtain). Any further elaboration (e.g., by cutting, sewing, knotting, wrapping, or dyeing) can result in “new” objects with different functions, meanings, and powers. This entry stretches the meaning of “threads” to embrace fibers (including, for example, bark strips), threads, cloth, and other thread-based surfaces or processes (e.g., crochet, embroidery), though cloth is most common. It technically stops short of dealing with clothing, though the distinction between what is cloth and what is clothing, a blanket, a rug, or some other item can be blurred. “Thread” in this broad sense thus relates to a vast web of social and environmental conditions, histories, temporal processes, skilled bodily practices, qualities, and significances. As things, threads—from filament to cloth or other fiber-based objects—may be considered a work of art, a craft, a commodity, or an artifact; the product of handwork or industry; or the work of an artist, craftsperson, specialist, or laborer. (For a review of archaeological textile studies, see Good 2001.)

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“Threads” and related terms such as “weaving,” “cloth,” and “fabric” have also had an active metaphorical life in anthropology. Threads of culture, of culture and society, of culture and power, and of combinations of art, politics, nationalism, economics, honor, meaning, community, life, and death are described as being woven together. These constituent threads form a fabric, often the fabric of culture, cultural traits, or life.

Theoretical threads in the history of anthropology

Histories of anthropology often start in the nineteenth century, prior to the institutionalization of the discipline. While references to threads are limited, the brief mentions nonetheless support key arguments. Theories pertaining to cultural evolution, popular in the mid-nineteenth century, spoke of the progress of the human race. In his writing on the course of human history, Lewis Henry Morgan ([1877] 1985) outlines the stages of human development, from savagery to barbarism to civilization. He notes that the distinct modes of life and social organization at each stage are dependent on material facts—technologies and their products—related to human needs. The existence of a particular set of material facts presupposes others and builds upon them. According to Morgan, the domestication of animals presupposes some form of village life, as does the knowledge of elementary forms of weaving and basket making. That certain Pacific Islanders and native Australians of Morgan’s time were reported not to weave was taken as evidence of their condition of savagery, while the mastery of weaving and other technologies by the Homeric Greeks signaled their progress to the upper status of barbarism, on the brink of civilization. Morgan’s work was of interest to Karl Marx, whose material-based evolutionary history focused on the modes of production at various stages of society. His writings abound with thread-based examples, including a discussion of value in which twenty yards of linen is a key item (Marx [1867] 1990). He also considers thread and cloth production as they move from peasant homes to spaces of capitalist production, with the concomitant homogenization and alienation of weavers’ labor in the creation of textiles as commodities.

Edward B. Tylor (1871) was another proponent of an evolutionary understanding of human progress. He introduced the idea of “survival”—that is, something (e.g., a custom, technology, object, or person) that endures from an earlier evolutionary period even though the surrounding culture has progressed to a higher stage. He offered a contemporary example, namely the old-fashioned handloom that a British peasant woman continued to use even though it pre-dated the flying shuttle (an invention that revolutionized weaving nearly a century and a half earlier, at the start of the Industrial Revolution).

Concern for universal evolutionary aspects of technologies such as spinning and weaving manifested itself materially in late nineteenth-century museum exhibits. In places such as the United States National Museum (Washington, DC) and the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), objects from all over the world were grouped by type and arranged to show the evolution of their technology (see Figure 1). The large glass cases held collections of spindles, shuttles, and looms displayed to show a progression from simple to

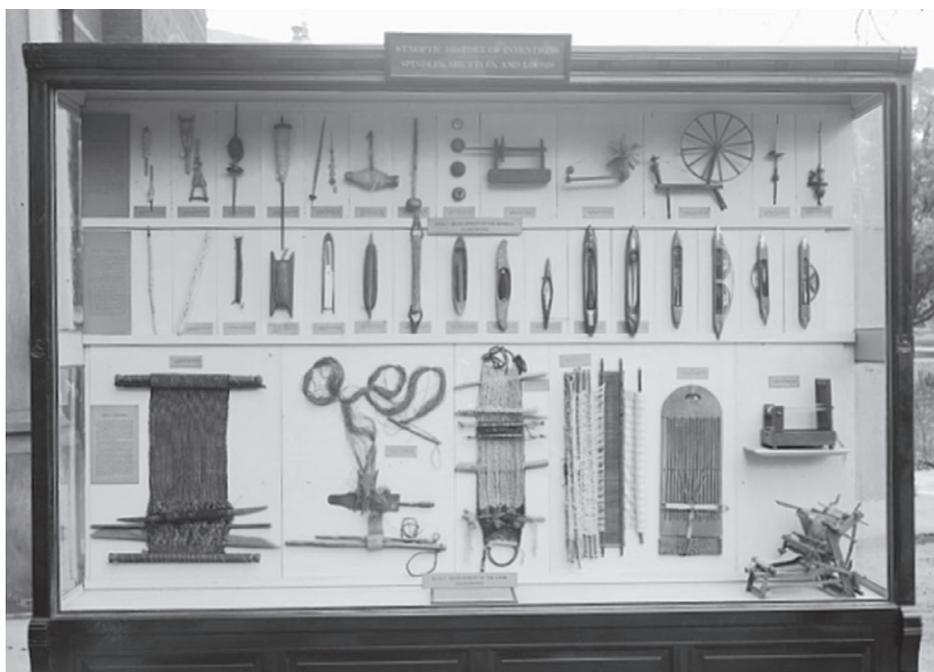


Figure 1 Textile technology exhibit on “Synoptic History of Invention: Spindles, Shuttles and Looms,” United States National Museum, 1880s.

Source: Reproduced with permission from the Smithsonian Institute.

complex forms and functions, a visual argument for the theory of linear human development. Pieces such as these also spoke to the role of collecting in the development of the discipline of anthropology. A number of early anthropologists started their university training in other disciplines but then changed academic focus in part because of experiences traveling abroad on scientific voyages, interacting with locals, and collecting for museums.

Franz Boas rejected evolutionary theories and disagreed with museum displays organized by universal types of objects. He argued instead for a presentation of objects understood within their particular cultural and historical context and exhibited in terms of how they were made and used. “Life groups”—typically mannequins representing tribal people working together—provided the visual means to this anthropological end. Thus, for example, a Boas exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History had models of Kwakiutl people engaged in making or using items of cedar bark (e.g., mats, rope) as well as display cases with the shredders, needles, and spindles used to work with cedar or mountain-goat wool. While Boas ceased working with museums early in the twentieth century, his interest in so-called primitive art continued. His book on that subject—*Primitive Art*, first published in 1927 and abundantly illustrated with Chilkat blankets, Peruvian textiles, and Huichol and Koryak embroidery—notes the influence of a dominant art on the other arts produced by a particular group of people (e.g., the patterns of Northwest Coast weaving as a source of inspiration for painting, carving, and ceramics).

Boas was central in establishing the idea of the intensive study of a culture by means of fieldwork and historical documentation. A teacher of a generation of US anthropologists (among them many women), his students included Ruth Bunzel and Gladys Reichard, both of whom devoted attention to weaving and cloth production. Bunzel conducted research in the Maya town of Chichicastenango (1930–32) and later wrote an ethnography by the same name (Bunzel [1952] 1967). As befitting a student of Boas, this work aspired to give a holistic sense of the community. In a discussion of economic life, Bunzel included brief but detailed information on raising sheep, spinning, warping, backstrap weaving, and the production of cloth and clothing. An appendix on the Chichicastenango market includes a six-page list of products for sale (raw cotton, wool, sewing silk, ribbon, and much more) plus prices for select items. Reichard's work with the Navajo includes an early instance of in-depth anthropological research on weaving and weavers. Beginning in 1930, Reichard spent four summers with a Navajo family and learned to spin, dye, and weave. She wove not only to learn to make *something* but also as a means by which to gain access to family life and, in particular, women's company, to learn firsthand how weaving was taught and to understand women's attitudes toward work (Reichard [1934] 1997, 1936).

Shifts in theoretical concerns after the earliest decades of the twentieth century—at the end of what has been called the “museum age”—meant much less interest in the material world, although there was continued research on threads-related topics by social-cultural anthropologists in museums and departments other than anthropology (e.g., Lila O'Neale in decorative art—formerly household art—at the University of California, Berkeley). Notwithstanding these changes, threads continued to have a modest and occasional presence in anthropological and related writings. Marcel Mauss ([1925] 1967), for example, used material collected by Boas and other researchers of the North American Northwest Coast and beyond in support of ideas on gift giving and reciprocity—ideas that would have a significant impact on threads-related writing decades later. Mauss saw the Chilkat blankets exchanged in potlatches as a form of wealth similar to currency.

Starting in the 1930s, and in opposition to Boas's cultural relativism, prominent voices in anthropology argued for revised evolutionary perspectives on human development, and here too threads played a small role in substantiating theory. For example, Leslie White (1943) considered energy in relation to cultural evolution across the millennia. He argued in broad terms, supported by equations and the formulations of laws, that humans needed to invent energy-saving tools and practices in order to succeed in moving beyond savagery and barbarism to civilization. He argued that tools such as needles and the domestication of plants and animals for fibers allowed humans to progress. Less time spent satisfying basic needs also allowed for the development of specialized groups such as weavers.

Another example from this period is Manning Nash's 1953–54 field research on industrialization and social change in Cantel, a highland Guatemala town that was home to Central America's largest textile factory. Nash was interested in the impact of factory work on this Maya community and the effects of industrialization on peasant lives. While the factory workers spun and wove cotton and produced textiles that accounted for the majority of cotton goods for sale in Guatemalan retail markets,

Nash's book *Machine Age Maya* (1967) gives only brief accounts of threads-related materials and processes. Instead, he focused on comparisons between farm and factory life in terms of family, social relations, and religion; explanations for the social changes that had occurred in Cantel; and general lessons learned from the study.

Throughout this period the fieldwork guide *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, reminded anthropologists of the breadth of field data—facts as well as objects—that might be collected. While early editions (starting in 1874) were geared to the “travelers” who provided armchair anthropologists with the data they needed for their written work, later versions of the book were tailored to create an aide-memoire to anthropologists doing long-term fieldwork and a prescriptive guide for thorough observations. Included in the lengthy index of topics covered in the 1951 volume are “Skins and Fabrics,” “Spinning and Weaving,” and “Dying and Painting,” along with “Diagram illustrating the Principles of Weaving” under the list of illustrations. The thirteen pages of dense text associated with these entries contain declarative, imperative, and interrogative sentences: “The *spindle* is an ancient appliance which has survived until modern times,” “Obtain as many varieties as possible of every kind of stitch, with their names,” “Are knotted strings used as aids to the memory?” (Royal Anthropological Institute 1951, 287). Entries are filled with explanations of terms, of technologies, of the fine points of distinction between related items, and of “points to be observed” (including encouragement to make diagrams and practice the various techniques) along with tips on collecting textiles.

Though originating under very different circumstances and used to very different ends, George P. Murdock's topical classification of cultural materials likewise consists of a subject list rich in threads-related topics: textile agriculture, wool production, textile industries, cordage, knots and lashings, mats and basketry, woven fabrics, and nonwoven fabrics (“Human Relations Area Files,” n.d.). Developed as an indexing system, the system became part of another Murdock project, the Human Relations Area Files. Founded in 1949 and continuing today, this project is a collection of information organized by topic and place that enables researchers to compare societies worldwide using qualitative and quantitative methods and to thereby test hypotheses.

A renewed interest in threads

While writers differ on the exact decade, the consensus is that social and cultural anthropology showed a renewed interest in the study of material culture starting in the last decades of the twentieth century. Anthropologists considered art, objects, commodities, goods, or things and, depending on the particular focus of a study, threads could be included under any of these more general labels.

The appearance of threads-related items in early anthropological works was generally minimal and the production of thread and cloth one of many possible examples that supported a theoretical point. Leslie White, for example, could have substituted his brief mention of needles for a mention of some other energy-saving tool, and Manning Nash's book-length ethnographic study of industrialization and social change in

a town with a large textile factory did not, in fact, depend on what was produced in the factory. Other mentions of cloth were ethnographic details meant largely to set the scene and not to argue a particular point. In comparison, studies that began to appear in the final decades of the twentieth century had threads-related objects and practices at the heart of the research project. These concerns motivated the work from the start, and the studies engaged with issues that spanned key theoretical and conceptual concerns, and regularly resulted in whole articles and books.

Jane Schneider's article "The Anthropology of Cloth," published in the 1987 *Annual Review of Anthropology*, marked threads' coming of age as a subject of anthropological significance. During the decade leading up to the article, Schneider had published on the political economy of textiles in world history, including the role of black versus polychromatic cloth and clothing in the hegemonic struggles in the Mediterranean region from the middle ages onward. She and others (e.g., Marie Jeanne Adams, John Murra, and Annette Weiner) were known for their in-depth studies of cloth and related objects and were important in fostering interest in the subject within social and cultural anthropology.

Schneider divided her review article into sections on social relations, cultural meanings, aesthetic issues (e.g., style and production traditions, and technical options in weaving, color, and post-loom decoration), and the politics and economics of European factory cloth along with developments in other world areas. The literature cited was extensive, with over 200 resources listed. The appearance of the *Annual Review of Anthropology* review followed a multidisciplinary conference organized by Schneider and Annette Weiner in 1983 with support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. *Cloth and Human Experience*, a volume edited by Weiner and Schneider, was published in 1989 and included articles by conference participants and others. The two works helped to solidify the academic and institutional recognition of thread and cloth as bona fide subjects of anthropological research.

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, threads-related subjects have been analyzed from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, through various conceptual lenses. As in earlier works, the writing has continued to reflect key conversations in anthropology; however, threads are now regularly the focus in large segments or entire works, and scholarship is based on long-term, focused research. To give a sense of this material turn, the following provides an outline of key theoretical and conceptual issues dealing with threads along with a sampling of ethnographic research from the 1960s onward.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism provided powerful analytical tools for relating threads to other aspects of people's lives. Starting in the late 1960s, Marie Jeanne (Monni) Adams used structuralist principles to investigate the logic of cloth and the processes used in textile production in Southeast Asia (Adams 1973). Her work examined designs—their organization and organizing principles—and linked these to the underlying logic of local life and intellectual orders: village layout, exchanges of gifts and women, and numbering and ranking of social units. Adams was also keenly aware of the processes involved in thread and cloth production—spinning, binding, dyeing, rinsing, warping, and weaving—and related these structurally and symbolically to issues such as gender, rituals, the life cycle, and myths.

Scholarship on threads influenced by symbolic anthropology was more or less coterminous with structuralism and provided fine-grained attention to semiotic systems of cultural meaning and metaphors. Anthropologists working around the world discussed how design motifs, for example, related to the sacred, myths, rituals, shamanistic and ancestral practices, and cosmological beliefs and thereby had the power to make visible the invisible. The material objects associated with threads, the technologies and work processes, and the finished objects were shown to relate symbolically to the human body (including human reproduction and eating), the life cycle and other forms of time, oral and written language, and aspects of identity. Within a particular cultural world, threads had the potential to refer to virtually any other culturally meaningful element, just as elements of that larger world reflected what was meaningful in threads.

Feminist analyses also joined the anthropological conversation on thread-related topics at this point and were important in raising the status of objects and processes often devalued because of their assignment to “women’s work.” Researching in the Trobriand Islands, the site of Bronisław Malinowski’s discipline-defining fieldwork on the Kula, Annette Weiner (1976) found that Malinowski had largely overlooked women’s wealth and their mortuary gift exchanges. The principal items made by women were banana-leaf bundles and banana-fiber skirts, along with a store-bought equivalent, namely yardage of manufactured cloth. These were exchanged in the commemoration of a death and represented impermanent but important valuables for members of this matrilineal society. Weiner’s work spoke not only to issues of women’s wealth, labor, knowledge, power, and exchange but also to the partial vision of earlier anthropologists who had excluded women and their work—often work deemed “domestic” or “craft” and hence of lesser value—from earlier studies. Weiner’s insights on threads were joined by those of other feminist anthropologists whose studies considered such topics as women’s knowledge in various areas of domestic life, fiber work as a form of gendered construction, women’s special—and sometimes occult—knowledge of material processes, women’s role in the production of style and economic markets, and other issues having to do with the gendered nature of materials and processes understood within particular social contexts.

Feminist anthropologists’ treatment of thread-based subjects reflected the changed world in which research and writing were taking place. The same must be said about the work of anthropologists interested in thread as it related to issues of political economy, globalization, and the creation of new desires and demands in field sites no longer envisioned as closed corporate communities. Within these realms of interest, anthropologists studied a range of topics: capitalism and other economic systems, local and international markets for cloth, women’s economic roles and power, agricultural production related to fibers, tourism, museums, and recycling and waste (the last being the end of life, so to speak, of threads-based objects). These topics in turn linked to other concerns including issues of authenticity and nostalgia for the handmade, ethnicity and class issues including those involving textile producers and entrepreneurs, identity politics, the selling of images as well as objects, piracy and intellectual property rights, and questions of value (e.g., relating to what is considered art versus craft).

Just as the spatial boundaries of research sites were expanding, so too were temporal concerns; historical considerations involving thread, never truly absent from anthropology, grew in importance in the late twentieth century. John Murra's 1950s and 1960s in-depth research on cloth and the Inca state in pre-European times can be taken as an example of other work to come (e.g., using archaeological findings and colonial sources to construct an ethnohistorical account) (Murra 1962). Writers examined the impact of the trade of goods and ideas between Europe and other parts of the world as well as systems seemingly untouched by Europe. Threads-related themes included the role of cloth in the development of industrial capitalism, thread and cloth production related to various aesthetics and values, collecting and exchanging valuables, and cloth as it moves into new functional roles in different contexts.

More recent developments in anthropological writing continue to be reflected in scholarship on threads. Works on the senses and issues having to do with materiality move beyond the symbolic and interpretive anthropology of earlier decades and consider threads-related practice well beyond the strictly visual and mental or rule based. Anthropologists are asking new questions: about the body in relation to making and other creative acts involving threads-related techniques and technologies of fabrication; about the skill involved in vision as this relates to making and assessing objects; and about the culturally recognized sensuous qualities of objects that allow them to relate to or be distinguished from other things. Tim Ingold (2007) offers his insights on threads, via concepts and issues of material practice, in the context of his writing on lines. He points out etymological ties between lines and flax or linen fibers as well as between text, textile, and weaving. In his taxonomy of lines, he identifies two major classes, traces and threads, with traces found in or on surfaces and threads suspended or tangled in space. These ideas in turn relate to larger discussions on walking, weaving, sewing, knitting, writing, singing, and more.

New directions of threads-based anthropological research reflect larger academic concerns. Studies concerned with new technologies, including intelligent threads, and human-material interactions only hint at the potential for recent and future topics.

SEE ALSO: Artisan; Authenticity, Cultural; Boas, Franz (1858–1942); Collecting; Design, Anthropology of; Embodied Learning; Evolutionism; Gender and Material Culture; Gender and Visual Arts; Materiality; Mauss, Marcel (1872–1950); Morgan, Lewis Henry (1818–81); Texture; Tylor, Edward (1832–1917); Weiner, Annette (1933–97)

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