

How Cloth as an Object Works on Us.

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We have begun a new project, “An Anthropological Study of Humans and Textiles.” This project is part of a Minpaku core research project, “The Anthropology of Materiality.” As a topic, the anthropological study of cloth or of cloth and humans seems very broad and ambiguous. What is the goal of this research?

The Feel of Cloth

The word “feel” is often used when talking about cloth. We touch cloth with our hands, drape it on our bodies, feel its softness or coarseness, then describe it in so many ways: lightly textured, smooth, cool, or hemp-like, for example. The feel of the cloth is not limited to texture. Color and pattern speak to our eyes. Fragrance, too, is part of the total experience. When we wear cloth, whether it is warm or cool is also part of its feel. Things we hold in our hands or wear engage all our senses. There is, however, something about cloth that brings to its feel a wealth of subtle nuances in the ways cloth touches our skin.

Cloth Works on People

Cloth is exhibited in museums and art museums, but there is something lacking when we can only look at it. There are always signs telling us, “Do not touch.” We only feel like we have really “seen” cloth when we have touched it with our fingers, turned it over, held it in our hands to feel its weight or lightness, wrapped it around our hips or draped it over our shoulders.

Cloth may of course become a sailing ship’s sails or be used for industrial purposes, but here we want to think first about the cloth that clothes our bodies. But to say that cloth clothes us is too simple. From birth to death, it enfolds us. We can never escape it. More than something external to us, something we use for some purpose, cloth is part of the most personal environment that surrounds the individual human being. It seems to have a will of its own and to

work on us in pursuit of its own goals. When we think about interactions between human beings and material things, cloth is so intimately connected with our humanity that it becomes a subject of deep interest for anthropological research.

The Situation thus Far

Each participant in our core project has until now pursued his/her own research on the production and consumption of traditional textiles in various parts of Asia. Researchers who study ceramics and paper cutting arts have contributed to the task of comparing our research results. Most of us anthropologists, however, lack the skills required to weave and dye cloth ourselves.

The foundations for research on cloth are research on spinning, weaving, and dyeing techniques, tools, materials, and the classification of patterns and colors in the finished cloth. That is a study of “material things” in a narrow sense. As anthropologists we draw attention to the human beings involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of cloth. The people are where we direct our attention. Who are these people? What are their relationships with each other? Why do they make cloth? How are the necessary skills transmitted from one generation to the next? These questions are the focus of our research.

In my own case, my research is concentrated on *batik*, a specific kind of cloth produced in Java, Indonesia. The results of our research have resulted in numerous monographs.

Research Objectives

The first goal of this project is to bring together the study of cloth as a material thing with the study of people, to think about the interactions between things and people. Our approach is not the one-sided one that focuses exclusively on how people make and use cloth. It includes the affect on people of making and using cloth. To us, these two sides of cloth are inseparable. “Feel,” the topic on which I briefly touched above, offers a hint about how to proceed. The total experience of cloth involves not only consumers but also manufacturers and sellers of cloth, the influence of materials and products, interactions between things, their environments, and their

circulation that affect all our senses. We are looking for better language, better concepts with which to talk about this.

Our second goal is to expand the scope of anthropological research in both approach and technique by placing our participants' monographs side-by-side and linking their results laterally. Recent years have seen a proliferation of scholars and young researchers interested in handicraft and how things are made from the manual labor of humans. We need to foster communication between these researchers and the producers of the things they study. We need to find more persuasive ways to talk about the ways in which material things and environments affect people and not cede the leading role only to human beings or only to human intellectual abilities. We aim to make our project a contribution to anthropology or the cultural and social sciences, but we would also like to develop dialogues with people beyond academia.