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Cultural artefacts and neglect of the materials from which they are made

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Abstract: This paper discusses an explanation, offered by Tim Ingold, for why social and cultural anthropologists have so far paid little attention to the materials from which artefacts are composed. The explanation is that these anthropologists accept a certain argument. According to the argument, what an anthropologist should focus on when examining an artefact are those qualities that make it part of a culture, and this is not the materials from which the artefact is composed. I show that Ingold has not made a compelling case against this argument, but also that it is not sound.

1 Introduction

Since at least the 1980s, there have been explanations offered for why social and cultural anthropologists pay little attention to artefacts in their works (Strathern 1990: 37–38; Miller 1987: 3–4; Henare et al. 2007: 9). In his essay 'On weaving a basket', Tim Ingold provides an explanation that addresses something more specific: why such anthropologists have paid little attention to the materials from which artefacts are composed (Ingold 2000: 340). Some artefacts are made of stone, some of wood, some of metal, and so on, yet this material constitution has been neglected he says and explains why. When discussing this explanation below, I use 'anthropology' as short for social and cultural anthropology, and 'artefact' as short for material artefact.

According to Ingold, the reason why anthropologists do not focus on the material constitution of artefacts is because the vast majority of them implicitly accept a certain argument (Ingold 2000: 340). I shall present the argument as three premises and a conclusion inferred from these premises:

(1) Anthropology is the study of different cultures.

(2) If anthropology is the study of different cultures, then what an anthropologist should focus on when examining an artefact is the quality that makes it part of a culture.

(3) The materials from which an artefact is composed do not make it part of a culture.

Therefore:

(4) When examining an artefact, the materials from which it is composed are not what an anthropologist should focus on.

If most anthropologists do indeed accept this argument, then we would have an explanation for why they pay little or no attention to the materials from which artefacts are composed.[1]

At this stage, it is worth elaborating a little on premise (3). According to Ingold, previous anthropologists hold that one should not infer that an object is part of a culture purely on the basis of its material constituents. For if an object with identical material constituents came into existence without being intentionally designed, through some natural process, then it would not be part of a culture at all (Ingold 2000: 340). The relevant intention is required. An artefact counts as cultural because: the maker, or makers, had an idea of that object beforehand; and then intentionally produced an object to correspond with their idea; and this idea participates in a shared tradition.

'Previous anthropologists' here means anthropologists who wrote prior to Ingold on artefacts, or at least the vast majority of them. What previous anthropologists apparently thought is that the artefact maker combines or shapes pre-existing materials – in other words, gives them a form – to produce an object that corresponds to a design within their mind. (In this paper, I will include qualifications like 'apparently' because I have doubts about how accurate Ingold is about past history. See the appendix.) Here is Ingold attempting to capture how previous anthropologists thought:

> "For nothing about their material composition *per se* qualifies artefacts for inclusion within culture… It is the form of the artefact, not its substance, that is attributed to culture. This is why, in the extensive archaeological and anthropological literature on material culture, so little attention is paid to actual

[1] I have written of 'the quality' in premise (2), but some anthropologists may think that what makes an artefact part of a culture is a plurality of qualities. The argument can easily be reformulated to cope with this point. Premise (3) is meant to exclude the thought that the quality of being composed from such and such materials makes an artefact part of a culture.

> materials and their properties. The emphasis is almost entirely on issues of meaning and form – that is, on culture *as opposed* to materiality. Understood as a realm of discourse, meaning and value inhabiting the collective consciousness, culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it." (Ingold 2000: 340)

I take this passage to be Ingold attributing the (1) to (4) argument above to previous anthropologists.

This argument is of interest not just as part of an explanation, but also as a justification. That is its primary interest for philosophy of social science. If the argument is sound, anthropologists would have a justification for not paying attention to the material composition of artefacts. Ingold does not think that this argument is sound. I agree, but the reason I shall present is different to Ingold's reason. I will dispute premise (2). After disputing this premise, I will consider Ingold's reason.

2 Premise (2)

Recall the content of premise (2): if anthropology is the study of different cultures, then what an anthropologist should focus on when examining an artefact is the quality that makes it part of a culture. Ingold does not dispute this premise, but I will. I will start by pointing out three inconsistencies, before making a more fundamental objection to the premise. The inconsistencies concern how premise (2) fits with the rest of Ingold's portrait of previous anthropologists, rather than whether it is simply false.

(i) Ingold attributes this premise to previous anthropologists, but he also attributes to them a certain account of what a culture is: that a culture is something within minds (or else within a group mind, if there is such a thing). He writes: "Understood as a realm of discourse, meaning and value inhabiting the collective consciousness, culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it." (Ingold 2000: 340) The main way of thinking about culture that concerns Ingold here is as follows: a culture consists of shared ideas[2]; ideas are concepts and beliefs within minds; and minds are non-material entities or else brains (see Sperber 1996: 1; Ingold 2000: 2–3).

However, it does not seem that previous anthropologists who think in this way can consistently count artefacts as part of a culture at all. For if a culture is within minds, then every part of a culture is within minds, but artefacts are not within minds. 'Artefact' in this paper

[2]A standard point within anthropology is that cultures cannot be neatly divided off from each other, culture A consisting of one set of ideas, culture B consisting of another set, a non-identical set. But much the same points can be made while thinking that human culture consists of ideas but denying that we can neatly divide human culture into culture A, culture B, culture C, etc.

means material artefact. Even if an artefact is the result of someone trying to make an object that corresponds to an idea of theirs, the artefact itself is not within their mind. So Ingold's previous anthropologists cannot consistently endorse premise (2), because this premise assumes that an artefact can be part of a culture.

Previous anthropologists could consistently endorse this premise if they were idealists. 'Idealists' here means people who think that the world consists only of ideas and minds. For idealists, what seem to be material objects are in fact ideas. But Ingold does not portray previous anthropologists as idealists. Rather they are either dualists, who think that there is matter but minds are non-material entities, or else they are materialists, specifically ones who think that minds are brains. Either way, they cannot consistently include artefacts as part of a culture. For these anthropologists, artefacts are material entities external to minds, even if they were intentionally produced by creatures with minds and even if they entirely realize design intentions.

(ii) Ingold's previous anthropologists deny that the material constituents of an artefact are part of a culture, but they do think of the form as cultural. A further question is whether they can consistently think this. The form of an object is the way in which its material constituents are combined together, or the way they are shaped. Whether this is the result of design or not, the form of an object does not itself seem to be something within a mind. An idea you have for an object's form is something within your mind, but not the form itself that you end up giving an object, regardless of how much it realizes the idea. In light of how Ingold presents previous anthropologists and their theory of culture as within the mind, along with their background metaphysics, I suspect what he should have said is: "Previous anthropologists studied the form of an artefact to learn about the idea of the form that was in the maker's mind, because it is this idea, or some component of it, that they thought of as part of a culture." (Ingold could contest that he should have said this by giving textual evidence that previous anthropologists thought of the form of an object as itself an idea, and not merely as the realization of an idea. But he does not provide such evidence.)

(iii) There is yet another inconsistency if previous anthropologists, as Ingold portrays them, say that the form of an artefact is part of a culture. Their argument against counting the material constituents as part of a culture is that the material constituents do not in themselves make an artefact part of a culture. If one knows the material constituents of an object but nothing else, one would not have grounds for thinking that it is a cultural object. Some natural process may have caused that object to be. But an analogous argument can be made about the form. If one knows the form of a material object but nothing else, e.g. one is told by a reliable informant that it has a spiral form, one would not have grounds for thinking that the material

object is a cultural object. Snail shells, galaxies and more have form, but they are not parts of any culture, for Ingold's previous anthropologists (Ingold 2000: 340). What is missing in these cases is the relevant intention: these are not objects that have been produced in order to realize a design, a design that participates in a cultural tradition. Given their reason for discounting the material constituents of an artefact as part of a culture, Ingold's previous anthropologists should also discount forms as part of a culture.

Let us now leave aside the three inconsistencies above and turn to a more fundamental objection to premise (2). It can be stated quite briefly. Suppose that there is some quality of an artefact that does not make it part of a culture but is very useful for gaining information about something that is part of a culture. Surely an anthropologist should pay attention to this quality as well. So premise (2) is false, because it denies this. According to premise (2), an anthropologist should focus on only the quality of an artefact that makes it part of a culture. This is far too strict a doctrine.

We can apply this general point to realize that previous anthropologists, as Ingold characterizes them, have an internal reason to pay attention to the material qualities of artefacts. By an internal reason, I mean a reason that emerges from within their worldview, once purged of the premise we have found to be false.

Ingold's previous anthropologists are interested in cultures as sets of shared ideas. Now the idea of an artefact in a maker's mind can include more than just an idea of the form. It can also include an idea of the purpose and the meaning, as Ingold himself implies (Ingold 2000: 340). Here the crucial point to note is this: the idea may also include a choice of materials. For example, an artist may conceive of a stone artwork, not a wood artwork or a metal artwork. For another example, a religious group may believe that they must use a silk dress in a marriage ceremony, leading a group member to make a dress from silk. The material constitution of an artefact may therefore provide a clue about what was included in the maker's idea. Much as an anthropologist has reason to examine the form of an artefact in the hope of gaining information about the idea in the maker's mind, so they have reason to examine the material constitution in the hope of gaining such information. Of course, in both cases the anthropologist may have to ask questions to the maker, or makers, but the basic point remains. Since the maker's idea may include a specification of the materials to be used, as well as a specification of how the materials are to be combined or shaped in the final object, there is no reason for neglecting the materials from which the artefact is made.

I anticipate Ingold protesting that what has been said so far still does not allow the material constituents of artefacts to be of interest in themselves to anthropologists. They are merely of interest as a means of acquiring information about ideas, because the ultimate object of study,

a culture, is conceived of as shared ideas within minds. This protest is correct, but it is also a modification of the stance in his essay. To repeat the point I made in the preceding paragraph: we can grant much of the worldview that Ingold attributes to previous anthropologists and yet they have reason to pay attention to material constituents, contrary to the impression he gives in his essay. We do not need to radically challenge this worldview to reveal such a reason. Also note that this worldview, purged of premise (2), does not licence paying more attention to the form of an artefact, as opposed to material constituents, contrary to what Ingold says. For people who accept this worldview, the reason to pay attention to form is as a means of acquiring information about shared ideas, and this is equally a reason to pay attention to material constituents.

3 Premise (3)

It is clear that Ingold rejects the argument we have been considering, but why does he reject it? In his essay, 'On weaving a basket', he does not challenge either premise (1) or (2). The first premise is disputed elsewhere in his writings (Ingold 2008: 69), but not in the essay we are focusing on.

Recall the content of premise (3): the materials from which an artefact is composed do not make it part of a culture. At this point, it is useful to imagine previous anthropologists saying the following, even though by now it will sound very familiar: "An artefact qualifies as part of a culture not because of the materials it is composed from, rather because its form is the result of intentionally producing an object with that form, to correspond with a prior idea of the object in the maker's mind. Furthermore, this idea must be part of a shared tradition." A worry about this statement is that some artefacts count as cultural because they are made from artificial materials, such as plastic. Ingold dismisses this worry (Ingold 2000: 340). But he thinks that the statement involves a series of assumptions and he is against a number of these assumptions (Ingold 2000: 339–340, 345–347). In 'On weaving a basket', his response to the argument we have been considering is therefore to reject it because of the dubious assumptions involved in the justification of premise (3). But I think some of these assumptions can be moderated or abandoned while still endorsing this premise.

Below are some of the assumptions Ingold is against:

(a) What distinguishes an artefact from certain superficially artefact-like productions, such as a beehive, is that the artefact-maker has an idea of what they want to make beforehand and the artefact is a realization of that idea.

(b) There is a mutually-exclusive distinction between artefacts and growths. Something cannot be both.

(c) For any artefact, the maker of the artefact has an idea of the artefact's entire form in their mind beforehand and the artefact is the realization of this idea.

(d) For any artefact, there is a distinction between its form and its substance, i.e. its material constituents.

(e) A culture is something within minds (or else within a group mind, if there is such a thing). And minds here are either non-material entities or brains.

Readers are bound to wonder why Ingold thinks that the person who justifies premise (3) in the way described depends on these assumptions. He mostly leaves us to guess the answer. My guess is that Ingold thinks of this justification as rooted in a philosophy which generally comes as a whole (2000: 339). One cannot coherently accept one element of such a whole without accepting the rest, or else the deviations one can make are insignificant (2000: 344), hence he attributes all the assumptions above to his opponent. I disagree with this holism. In the essay of his that I have been focusing on, Ingold's most developed challenge is to assumption (c). In the rest of this paper, I want to consider this assumption.

Ingold challenges the assumption by offering a counterexample. His example is the coiled basket:

> "This is not the case with basketry, however, which involves the bending and interweaving of fibres that may exert a considerable resistance of their own… One could say that the form unfolds within a kind of force field, in which the weaver is caught up in a reciprocal and quite muscular dialogue with the material." (Ingold 2000: 342)

This example is very useful. But it is natural to respond to Ingold by saying that, even if the exact form was not in the basket-maker's mind beforehand, could there not have been some more vague idea of the form in their mind? After all, the basket-maker set out to make a coiled basket, and not something else, such as a necklace.

Ingold concedes that there may be a vague idea of the form beforehand (Ingold 2000: 342), but he claims that the standard view of artefacts is that the entire form of the artefact was in the maker's mind before trying to make it:

> "Now it is very often assumed, in the study of both organisms and artefacts, that to ask about the form of things is, in itself, to pose a question about design, as if the design contained a complete specification that has only to be 'written out' in the material… the artefact is supposed to pre-exist, fully represented as a 'virtual object' in the mind, even before a finger has been lifted in its construction." (Ingold 2000: 343)

I do not think that Ingold provides sufficient textual evidence for this reading of previous anthropologists. I see hardly any evidence, and I suspect that it portrays previous anthropologists as more extreme than they actually were. The claim that for any artefact, the entire form of the artefact was conceived beforehand is a very extreme claim, and I think it would be remarkable if many previous anthropologists committed themselves to it. It goes against the common experience of having to alter one's plans as one makes something. I suspect previous anthropologists were mostly committed to the moderate claim that there was some idea of the form beforehand. (See the appendix below.)

Furthermore, previous anthropologists do not need to make an assumption as strong as assumption (c) when arguing that the material constituents of an artefact do not make it part of a culture. Even if they do somehow make this assumption, they do not need to. In the case of a certain coiled basket, they can say that it counts as cultural because the intention was to make a coiled basket, which is a kind of product within this culture. It does not matter if many of the more specific details are not the result of previously conceiving these details and then shaping the material to conform to this conception. By drawing attention to and challenging a number of assumptions, Ingold makes a very valuable contribution. But at present I cannot see how to extract from his essay a compelling case against premise (3) or against the justification he associates with it, because this justification need not involve an assumption as strong as the one which he attacks.

4 Appendix: historical note

When attributing the argument to previous anthropologists, Ingold writes as if they do not explicitly make it. Rather it is affecting their minds at a level that is not fully conscious:

> "This is precisely the kind of view that lies at the back of the minds of anthropologists and archaeologists when they speak of artefacts as items of so-called 'material culture'. The last thing they mean to suggest, in resorting to this phrase, is that in the manufactured object the domains of culture and materiality somehow overlap or intermingle." (Ingold 2000: 340)

Explaining the thinking at the back of the minds of anthropologists is a risky venture, and Ingold provides almost no evidence for his reading. I am not a historian of anthropology and so I have largely proceeded without disputing his portrait of how most previous anthropologist thought, but below I wish to point out three challenges to his reading of history.

(i) The first challenge comes from the divide between British social anthropology and American cultural anthropology. Traditionally, British social anthropologists did not think of cultures as their object of study. So even if they did not count the material constituents of an

artefact as part of a culture, this would not give them a reason to ignore these constituents. Perhaps Ingold believes that they were committed to a parallel argument, where the object of study was thought of as different societies but materials were not thought of as part of any society.

(ii) When searching for anthropologists who accept the argument, it is natural to look at the writings of those cultural anthropologists who think of a culture as a set of ideas within people's minds, or who have a closely related understanding of cultures (e.g. Geertz 1973: 5; Schneider 1980: 1; Sperber 1996: 1). The second challenge comes from other understandings of what a culture is, ones which give more space for treating the material constituents of an artefact as part of a culture. For example, Malinowski divides cultures into customs and artefacts and Melville Herskovits understands culture as the man-made part of the environment (see Prinz 2016).

(iii) At least some previous anthropologists knew that artefacts are not simply realizations of a design which is fully-specified in the maker's mind beforehand. Ingold acknowledges this point. He says:

> "Effectively, the form of the basket emerges through a pattern of *skilled movement*, and it is the rhythmic repetition of that movement that gives rise to the regularity of form. This point was made long ago by Franz Boas, in his classic work *Primitive Art*." (Ingold 2000: 342)

So it does not seem that Franz Boas held that an artefact is the realization of a fully-specified design idea. But Boas was also influential and he expressed an alternative view in a classic work. There is a worry then that there would have been, or simply are, a significant number of anthropologists who were influenced by Boas and did not accept what Ingold regards as the dominant conception of an artefact.

I anticipate someone proposing that this third challenge fails to understand which period in the history of anthropology Ingold is focusing on. The proposal is that he is attributing the dominant conception of artefacts to a period which lasts at least until when he was writing but begins after the heyday of Boas's influence. However, Ingold himself provides no such specification. He actually quotes Marx and then writes as if this is how most anthropologists think (Ingold 2000: 340), which makes it seem as if he is uncovering an assumption that has been there throughout anthropology's professional history, occupying a place that lies beneath the levels where most of the changes happen. The Boas reference challenges this view.

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