THE PLACE OF AGENCY THEORY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

EBBAH EMMANUEL; & *ABDULMALIK ABDULMALIK A.*

Department of Archaeology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Abstract

The beauty of every archaeological investigation is the interpretation of the past through material remains. Among the principles and theories for archaeological interpretation is Agency. Agency is a principle used to explain and resolve issue in the relationship between environment and human. This is just all about putting people back in the past and the relationship between them (humans); consequences of their action and their environment. This paper is a review of the concept of Agency from general perspective to archaeological interpretation;

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highlighted the themes of archaeological agency; and as well as the significances of Agency Theory in Archaeological interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Literarily, the concern of every archaeologist is the interpretation of the voiceless data that could not speak for themselves, but hold some vital information about the past society where the materials were obtained. The reason for the concern is that, archaeologist also try to understand the non-material aspect of culture such as their belief systems, their rituals, their habits, their traditions and their interaction with their environment by analysis of the archaeological record. Archaeologists as social scientists are also shadowed with

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responsibilities of understanding not only the relationship between humans and their environments, but to also understand the outcome or the consequences of humans' action on the environment. In achieving this aim task, archaeologists view material remains as the products of activities of an individual or group of people that occupied the settlement over time. Therefore, a theory that sees material culture as an action of an individual and the consequence of those actions is applicable in archaeological investigation, which popularly known as Agency Theory.

It was observed by Hodder (2000), that early uses of the concept of agency were, as is so often the case in the history of archaeological theory, reactionary: behaviourism and determinism gave the human no volition in their own action. There was no choice but to act out their part on the grand process, without power to make their mark, as also supported by (Malchair, 1791). Agency, however, is the means by which an individual could feed back into the process and change the structures they lived within by their actions. Agency became conflated with action and with the idea of the actor itself (Moore 2000) and as the concept was adopted became a general panacea for the ills of archaeological theory (Dobres & Robb 2000). Although individuals were now considered within theory, they were still either a historical constructs, assuming the characteristics of the authors whose service they were at (Harris 2006:27; Brück 2001), or 'specifically situated subjects' that are subject to problems in the understanding of that subjectivity (Joyce 2008).

This question of subjectivity and the nature of the individual itself became bound up in the question of agency and of personhood (Patterson 2005). Ascribing to an individual the property of boundedness and the autonomy required to make choices and exercise agency may not be correct for all places and times, as shown by Strathern (1988) and the 'dividual' sense of personhood observed in Melanesia. It became no longer tenable to theorize individuality as a given and thus ideas of what it is to be a person are historically contingent. There needs to be a consideration of personhood as contributing to agency, but recognition that it is situationally specific: a category to consider but not the category content itself.

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In common with other aspects of archaeological theory adapted from other social science, the idea of agency is grounded in similarly modern ideas of what it is to be a human. The authors credited with the introduction of ideas that are now known as agency (Dornan 2002), Giddens and Bourdieu, did so on the basis of their own historically situated understanding of what it is to be human. Combining the ideas from Bourdieu's practice theory, knowledge theory, business analysis and Barrett's understanding of agency, the enabling and constraining factors that determine agency in a given situation can be drawn.

Agency Theory in Archaeology

Archaeology deals with the remains of the acts of an individual (Hodder & Hutson 2003: 7); that could tell more about the past society. It is at this scale of preference that the material upon which the theory operates is found. The bigger questions and the desire to understand the social environment around that individual, lead to the need to 'zoom out' and view the evidence from a higher vantage point, although at this scale the tendency can be to look for patterning rather than understanding (Bourdieu 1977:2). Whilst the concept of agency allows for actors to be humanised in theoretical constructs, there is a very real difficulty in applying such theoretical frameworks to the everyday realities of archaeological practice (Johnson 1999).

As Barrett (2000) noted, that the evidence in the archaeological record is of an action, not of agency. What can be seen archaeologically are the remains of the consequence of the action, intended or unintended, the rest of the framework is only available by induction (Wylie 2002:21). Neither the consequence nor the motivations to act are preserved, effectively denying the view of the actual person performing the act. Even when literal evidence of a person is seen e.g. fingerprints on a pot or preserved footprints, this does not increase the knowledge gained from studying that pot beyond the general idea that fingerprints were acceptable on a pot (although this is an assumption on the basis that the pot was not smashed in deliberate rejection and assumes that smashing would be how it would be known to be unacceptable). This reveals nothing about the actual individual other than that they had fingers. It

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cannot even be discerned whether the prints were a desirable or merely tolerated attribute of the finished pot.

Material culture studies demonstrate that artefacts like the fingerprinted pot are not passive bystanders in human lives: objects have meaning and a life path of their own, entangled with the humans who make and use them and creating the human as much as the object itself is created (Hodder 2012). By the definition of agency explored above, these objects have agency as they influence outcomes even in such humble ways as causing a human to unthinkingly trip.

The materiality of materials themselves, their woodenness or stoniness influences human behaviours and thoughts. As Ingold (2011) argued, it can be as if materials only start to matter once a human has shaped them or otherwise brought them within their sphere of influence, has given them agency, as if it were something that could be added at will. Instead, he insisted, materials have agency because they have influence. Objects have agency because they have influence. The archaeologist is performing a role in a process, whatever that process might be, and is subject to the same framework of enabling and constraining factors. It is this agency though that determines the knowledge generated by the archaeological activity. If it is assumed that the purpose of archaeological thought is to turn data from the past into knowledge about the past then, as Hodder (2003) pointed out, the consideration of the theorising of archaeology must also consider the archaeologist as part of the process of knowledge creation. The archaeologist selects the method of analysis and methodology, collects data deemed important to answer what is considered important lines of enquiry. All of these actions influence the knowledge generated, and therefore the outcome.

Themes of Agency Theory

The understanding of the themes of agency theory in archaeology broad the readers' idea on how the agency theory operate in archaeological interpretation and the significance to archaeological interpretation. There are basically, five (5) themes of agency theory and these include: power, action, time, relationship and humanity; as examined below.

Power: is the ability to influence others to believe, behave, or to value as those in power desire them to strength, validate, or confirm present

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beliefs, behaviours or values. Power in agency theory also deals with weather physical properties have power over human being or human beings have power over the physical properties.

Action: this is seen as the process of doing something. Action in archaeological agency focuses on we can understand either the consequence of a particular action was intentional or unintentional from archaeological record.

Time: this can be seen as the period when a particular action took place at a location. The most static things in human's life, is change and as such changes takes place in humans life. The understanding of when things happened, started and or ended in the past are also part of the area of interests to archaeology and this is interpreted through agency theory. Changes that took placed over time in society is referred to as transformation, while certain things that remained unchanged are referred to as transition (Gundu, Pers. Comm.; 2016).

Relationship: this is seen as the manner in which things are associated or connected. This is also part of the concern of agency theory to interpret the connection between things and how they can be distinguished from others.

Humanity: this aspect of agency theory deals with the understanding of human with the certain individual traits or group and the differences between them. Agency in this regards try to explain either human being has responsibilities over what was produced and other factors that might influence the production.

Significance of Archaeological Theory

This gives more scope for the process to be performed by a person, but is still not specific enough to understand what that person might do and how they might. Ingold (2011: 53) described how one might engage with the physical task of sawing logs and how the steps in the sequence are not discrete but flow from one to another, each shaping and subtly altering. The significance of Agency theory in archaeology, assist to determine the power of an individual in the past societies which will be well understood through the consequences.

Agency theory assists to understand the real process or action of man on an environment or the influence of environment over man in

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archaeological record. This theory also observed that, at times man had power to perform or influence certain things in the past but might not really execute or perform the action. Agency theory therefore point out the action of an individual through consequences. Agency theory is useful in the understanding of what changes that had taken place in the history of human over time and how and what influences the changes. Agency theory is useful in archaeology to explain the connection between an individual and environment and also an individual and the object. Agency is useful to determine and distinguished activities of an individual or group in society. Agency from the theme of the humanity assist to interpret either man has responsibilities over what was produced or not; agency as well try to explain other factors that might be associated with the product(s). Agency also as well useful in interpreting other non-material culture attributed to a particular society over time.

Conclusion

Agency theory can be seen as consequences of action of man and interaction of man with an environment. Agency as explained above is a theory that tries to interpret material culture in archaeological perspective in order to take man back to the past environment as in support of both culture history and processual archaeology movements. This theory have really helped in the proper interpretation of archaeological data and brought an insight about the re-thinking and functioning of the past societies through the consequences. It is however also paramount to highlight that the application of agency theory in archaeological investigation is an argumentative and debatable discussion among scholars. But, nevertheless, the place of agency theory as explained above when all the necessary have been fulfilled served a lot of significance in archaeological interpretation.

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