



## **EXPLANATION: A CORE VALUE IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

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### **Abstract**

*Inferring proper meaning from the bulk of material evidence archaeologists come across on the field has been a major challenge over the years in most archaeological research. Bearing in mind that these evidence cannot speak for themselves, archaeologists have to speak for them. This paper presents the need to adopt various ways of knowing for proper explanation of past phases by the archaeologist.*

### **Introduction**

To understand the place of explanation in archaeology, it is expedient first of all to discuss and understand what explanation and archaeology are all about. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, explanation refers to "a statement, fact, or situation that tells you why something happened; a reason given for something". This can as well be viewed as a process of clarifying or giving meaning to an issue or a point of discourse. Archaeology on the other hand, has been simply defined as the study of human past through the material remains left behind. (Scarre 2005: 25). Archaeology is a field of discipline or enquire that seek to order and describe events of the past and give explanation to

those events. The primary purpose of archaeology is to help us understand ourselves. To move towards that end, most archaeologists pursued three basic goals which are observation, description and explanation, each building on the other. Just like it is found in all science, archaeology begins with the discovery and description of new information. Like newspaper reporters, archaeologists ask the five basic “W” questions: *who, what, when, where, and why*. The first four questions are answered by the discovery and description of archaeological materials, and once that task has been completed, archaeologists seek to explain the past by addressing the why question. Archaeologists seek to reconstruct the life ways of past people, their daily lives, where they lived, what they ate, what their tools were, how they interacted, adapted, employ and make used of their environment(Sutton and Yohe II, 2006).

Therefore, the clue to the past that archaeologist seek is majorly to some extent depended on the material culture (remains) of past inhabitant. This is because these material remains are product of human culture and they tell us more about humans’ life ways in the past. Thus materials remains are significant to archaeological investigation.

## **THE PLACE OF EXPLANATION IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

Archaeologists examine the past through systematic and careful studies of those things which humans made and used at different places through time. However, not all activities of man can be put into concrete forms, for example, greetings, gesture, movement, language among others. Similarly, it is not everything that human put into a concrete form that survives with time. Thus, the need for explanation becomes a paramount issue in archaeology. “Indeed, archaeologists are generally aware of the limitations of their own evidence. Not only are there the obvious problems of poor or differential preservations of material remains but the sample of human behavior represented by those remains that survive are likewise limited” (Gould 1978: X). Hence, interpretations of the archaeological record depend on how representative the surviving stone implements, pottery, bone, textile, metal or other objects are of the total material culture. “It follows that the reliability of our statement about this culture also depends on how strongly we can believe that the non-material elements of the society and culture are reflected in the incomplete collection of finds that has come down to us” (Fagan 1975:113-114, cfOkpoko 2006).

However, archaeological remains being a representation and carrier of past human culture lacks the capacity to speak for themselves. It

therefore becomes necessary on the part of the archaeologists to speak for them, giving room for the place of explanation in archaeology. Archaeologists go beyond reconnaissance, survey and surface collection of cultural materials, but on several occasions adopt what is known as excavation; this is a scientific and systematic way of digging the ground in a stratigraphical order, so as to unearth buried cultural materials and evident of human activities, all geared towards a better explanation of the past. To answer the question *who, what, when, where, and why* is one of the most difficult task in archaeology. Indeed, it is the most challenging and interesting task in any science or field of knowledge. For with this question the archaeologists go beyond the mere appearance of things, their face or aesthetic value and on to a level of analysis that seeks in some way to understand the pattern of events. (Renfrew and Bahn 2000)

Therefore, in an attempt to give explanations to bulk of the cultural materials archaeologists come across often time on the site, the following should be put into consideration:

- i. That material remains are aspect of human culture and not the totality;
- ii. That material remains are not ends in themselves but means to an end;
- iii. That most cultural materials are not always recovered in their complete forms;
- iv. That the required information for the explanation of past human activities are

- not readily available by looking at material evidence on its face value; and,
- v. That there exist some relationship between the past and the present.

It therefore becomes inevitable on the part of the archaeologist to utilize relevant information that can be derived from contemporary societies with similar material to that which was recovered from an archaeological site for better interpretation of past ways of life of ancient people. This process in archaeology is termed ethnoarchaeology. This involves the use of ethnographic analogy as an explanatory model for the interpretation of archaeological data. That is, “a reasoning that infers relationships between archaeological data and the ethnographic one” (Odofin, 2006). Using this requires ability to be able to establish some degree of cultural continuity between the past and present society under study taking into cognizance changes in time, place, and people. More so, ethnographic analogy can better be more reliably drawn from societies that are geographically identical or contiguous to some extent. The use of analogy was further expanded by Lewis Binford (cf Matthew 1999) in what he called middle-range theory. He is of the view that all archaeologists of whatever theoretical strip make a link between present and past by using analogies. We always make an assumption that things in the past were like analogous to the present, that is, similar in some ways. All archaeologists offer possible links between statics and dynamics, every time they put forward an interpretation of archaeological evidence. In practice archaeologists do this by

making assumptions about the middle range, that is, the space between statics and dynamics. For example, we excavate a cemetery consisting of a few graves with lots of grave-goods and many graves with very little (static data); from this we infer a society characterized by wealth or social inequality (past dynamics). We do so by assuming a middle-range link between the number and/or value of grave goods and the social/economic status of the person buried (Matthew 1999).

For better explanation in the aspect of the use of artifact, its methods of production, wear and tear, among others, archaeology adopt what is known as experimental archaeology. This also involves experimental stages based on observation made and artificially controls condition. For example, to duplicate the stone tools recovered in an archaeological context by experiment, to find out the method of manufacture, and the function of the stone tools. This is achieved by making similar tools and using them for the function they were suspected to have been used for, and by also comparing the wear patterns of the newly manufactured tools with those found or recovered from the archaeological context.

Given the new trend in the field of archaeology (Postprocessual Archaeology) and their quest to give better and meaningful explanation to past event. It was argued that there is no single truth about the past, only narratives or description of what the interpreter (the archaeologist) wanted to see (Sutton and Yohe II, 2006). One of the basic arguments of this proponent is the need to be

gender sensitive in interpreting archaeological remains, that is, archaeologists should focus their study on the roles of men and women through the archaeological record. Even though related to feminist archaeology, it is totally different from it. Feminist archaeology places women at the centre of investigations and it is gynocentric. While Gender Archaeology involves reconstructing the past from a wider perspective that capitulate the role of male and female in the society. “With gender archaeology, it is possible to begin to understand the entirety of the social organization of past societies from a broader framework transcending the equator of man the hunter, man the tool maker and looking into the possibility of man and woman, the hunter and even man and woman the tool maker. Gender in archaeology transcend beyond designated roles on sex basis, we should begin to analyze and dissect gender based on age, social status, wealth and other parameter”. (Bakinde and Assa 2008:79).

## **Discussion**

There is no universally accepted perspective from which to understand or explain the human past, this is because there are many ways of knowing. Today there are different approaches to explain *who, what, when, where, and why*, because the most fundamental question guiding archaeology today is of the aboveand *why* things change? This gave rise to the need for explanation in archaeology. The archaeological literatures are awash with theories and models among which are ; Historical Archaeology, Middle-Range theory,



Gender in Archaeology, Cognitive Archaeology, Phenomenology, Functionalist Model, Evolutionary archaeology, Experimental Archaeology, Forensic analysis, Simulation Studies, Ethnoarchaeology, among others. All claiming special insight into explaining the past in archaeology. For better understanding and study of culture history, reconstructing past life ways and elucidating cultural processes by the archaeologists, they often take into cognizance the limitations attached to the nature of archaeological records, in that, they are fragmented aspect of the totality of human culture and the fact that they cannot communicate to us about the past (cannot speak). Archaeologists in their bid to get answers to these challenges often adopt series of explanatory methods for better archaeological explanation of their material evidence recovered from different archaeological sites. Therefore, one can safely say that, explanation play a significant role in the interpretation of archaeological records.

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