

Chapter 2

Ethnoarchaeology of the Intangible Culture: A Trajectory Towards Paleoethnology as a Global Discipline?

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Introduction

It is well known that the New Archaeology's ethnoarchaeology has essentially dealt with problems that derive from the study of a material culture, which aims to recognize the patterns of behavior that produced specific archaeological traces. This materialistic procedure (i.e., the research of the natural laws that transformed human actions into archaeological remains) in any case concerns something intangible: specific actions of past human beings and their cultural recurrence that became patterns of behavior (see Cazzella 1986, p. 46). Obviously, the actions that do not leave archaeological traces (speaking, singing, dancing, etc.) are twice as intangible. Moreover, the meanings of both of these kinds of actions is intangible. Generally speaking, all human actions are part of a wider cultural context, which is of course intangible and does not correspond to a set of artifacts that archaeologists find during excavations. In fact, institutions, and social, economic, and political relationships and ideological aspects cannot be directly ascertained by field research. Therefore, the intangible part of a culture in prehistoric archaeology is much greater than in ethno-anthropology, where people can be observed and interviewed, even though institutions or relationships cannot be seen directly. The principal questions deriving from these truisms in relation to ethnoarchaeology are the following: Can ethnoarchaeology help us to decipher this set of intangible phenomena, going beyond material culture, in specific past contexts? If so, does ethnoarchaeology not change itself into the discipline that 150 years ago was called "paleoethnology" (and is a term still used in Italian studies), albeit in a renewed way? Can this renewed way entail a global perspective?

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Paleoethnology aims to study all the aspects of a prehistoric culture and its transformations from an anthropological point of view. In fact, the goal of paleoethnology is not only the classification and dating of findings, but also the acquisition of a global knowledge of non-literate societies, outlining the social, economic and political organization and ideological aspects. The ethno-anthropological interconnected concept of culture can still be considered useful, avoiding the archaeological simplistic one (of historic cultural tradition) as a patchwork of cultural traits, which was criticized in the 1950s by Childe (Childe 1956, Ch. 3). Obviously it should not be forgotten that any knowledge protocol in prehistory starts from the acquisition of archaeological field data, and then uses such data to get to the intangible aspects. Ethno-anthropology can be useful in this attempt to reconstruct (piecing together the meaning of the available data) or to better interpret the past.

Looking for the behavioral laws that have resulted in a specific archaeological record, New Archaeology has avoided terms such as “reconstruction” or “interpretation” of the past, preferring to use “explanation.” Trust in the existence of universal laws of human behavior (allowing the explanation of specific phenomena) is lost—only the natural laws ruling the transformation of human actions into archaeological findings remain universally valid. Nevertheless, understanding which natural law was active in a specific archaeological case, and which kind of action was performed, does not help to “translate” their meaning in our contemporary intellectual framework. The idea that the principle concerning a constant minimization of effort is generally valid, implying that any human action is inspired by this principle, is also lost. The term “action” rather than “behavior” is preferable in this case because of the processual implication of the latter. While the former recalls Agency Theory and its more flexible approach, which includes both individuals (or better “collective individuals” as regards prehistory) as actors and a specific culture as a common basis of their acting (Robb 2010; Cazzella and Recchia 2013).

It can be argued that one should deal explicitly with the problems related to the understanding of the meaning of past human actions, trying to avoid the traps of the post-processual school, which fluctuates between a total relativism and the idealistic universalism of empathy (Hodder 1986, Ch. 5; see also Melas 1989). In fact, empathy is founded on the undemonstrated universal principle that we can enter the minds of our ancestors (even those who are geographically far from us) because human values and needs are always uniform.

The cognitive approach has led scholars to become aware of the fact that only mechanisms of thought are general, while values, beliefs, and aspirations are specific to each culture (Renfrew and Zubrow 1994; Flannery and Marcus 1998). Therefore it should be noted that:

- A definite interpretation of specific prehistoric processes can never be reached.
- Different interpretations are reciprocally in competition.
- The most successful is not a measure of the best interpretation.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, interpretive activities should not be abandoned; conscious of these limits, the problem of interpreting the past as coherently as possible within an explicit theoretical framework needs to be dealt with, valuing data that either sustains or rejects a specific hypothesis.

Returning to the theme specifically under examination, obviously today the paleoethnology of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries cannot be practiced, either using uncritically ethnographic similarities or coming back to the approach of the historic cultural school. The latter was of great importance in prehistoric research, not only regarding its approach founded on diffusion to explain cultural change, but also its prevailing attention to typological studies, which survived the diffusion theory itself. As mentioned above, New Archaeology's approach was correctly critical of the limits of the historic cultural school (see, e.g., Binford 1972), but its own proposals were not satisfactory either. Its contribution was very important when dealing with specific problems regarding the link between archaeological deposit and human activities, but it was weaker when related to the study of the intangible aspects which, as mentioned above, are the greater part of any archaeological culture, including relationships among the individuals constituting a society. "Archaeology as Anthropology," formulated in the 1960s and early 1970s by Binford (1972) and his early followers, later partly lost its original wide spectrum of themes (for example on funerary archaeology or the naïve but stimulating research on individual pottery styles and kinship systems (Hill 1968; Longacre 1968; Binford 1971), abandoning the objective of a real ethno-anthropological interest in all human practical and non-practical activities. In fact, over the following years, New Archaeology's attention to ethno-anthropology sharply differentiated between the abovementioned *stricto sensu* ethnoarchaeological approach and the use of cross-cultural studies, either to propose or to confirm specific hypotheses.

Colin Renfrew (1973, 1994) also followed a personal path within New Archaeology, changing his ideas more than once. The aim to get to intangible aspects, going beyond archaeological materials, always fascinated Renfrew. His attempts to outline the organization of prehistoric societies using the models of societies (band, tribe, chiefdom, or primitive state) proposed by American neo-evolutionists such as Marshall D. Sahlins (1968) and Elman R. Service (1971), but also his considerations about the need to detail these models better, are well known; see, for example, his distinction between collectivizing and individualizing chiefdoms in English late prehistory (Renfrew 1973, p. 267). However, according to Renfrew, the contribution of ethno-anthropology is not limited to this final objective; it also looks at the methods used to achieve it. His studies on demography and settlement patterns, agricultural techniques and exchange systems, social and political structures, and funerary customs, imply a frequent reference to contexts of ethnographic interest in order to propose hypotheses to be applied to specific archaeological situations. In a second phase, he devoted himself to the study of the "Archaeology of Mind," nevertheless preserving his materialistic roots. He wrote "... for the cognitive-processual archaeologist, it is enough to gain insights into *how* the minds of the ancient communities in question worked and into the manner in which that working shaped their actions" (Renfrew 1994, p. 6). Nonetheless, it can be contended that "to gain insights into *how* the minds of the ancient communities

in question worked” might not be enough to achieve archaeological reconstructions. In fact, the way their minds worked (i.e., the cognitive mechanisms) probably did not actually shape their real actions. The problems that derive from any kind of research on the intangible aspects of the past, and the role that ethno-anthropology can play by outlining an archaeological protocol in this field, are manifest: scholars adhering both to post-processual archaeology and Agency Theory have debated them widely.

The importance of the symbolic aspects in Hodder and colleagues (1977, 1982), beginning from the difficult problem of recognizing ethnicity factors in archaeological records, is well known. For example, the cautionary tales that derive from ethno-anthropology in this field of study are obviously of great relevance. Nevertheless, the totally free narrative character of post-processual archaeology’s approach (see, e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987) appears to many to be its principal limit.

“Agency” is intrinsically an intangible subject and the ethno-anthropological basis (*lato sensu*) of Agency Theory is evident (Bourdieu 1972; Giddens 1979; Ricoeur 1977). The real challenge is how to put its principles into practice, recognizing the actors (who, as mentioned above, can be considered to always be collective, at least in prehistory) and their real actions (a recent synthesis in Robb 2010).

Furthermore, the problem of archaeologically studying ancient perceptions (the archaeology of the senses; see, for example, Skeates 2010) has recently been dealt with, and obviously it only regards intangible contexts. Studies on past sensorial experience have been carried out, analyzing either specific senses (involving concepts such as “smell-scape,” “sound-scape,” etc.) or, more rarely, following a multi-sensorial perspective. Difficulties in the acquisition of pertinent data are evident, but the aim to explore less-taken roads is admirable. Nevertheless, the risk of swinging between highly subjective idiographic reconstructions and generalizing psychological postulates always seems to threaten these studies.

This brief summary of the relationships between the analyses of intangible aspects in prehistoric archaeology and the contributions of ethnoanthropology to reach that objective aims to provide a basis to discuss a perspective that can be renamed “paleoethnological.” In particular, the need for a global approach in contemporary paleoethnology has been mentioned. The term “global” (as well as “holistic,” with a slightly different set of meanings) was used in many different ways, so it seems to be appropriate to define its use here. Various archaeologists used it to express an idea of multi-dimensional study, notwithstanding differences between them. Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus were among the first scholars to take into consideration the potential of this concept in the 1970s (a retrospective in Flannery and Marcus 1998; see also Hills 2005). They highlighted the need to integrate the interest in subsistence and ecology of anthropological archaeology on the one hand, and that of symbolic aspects of traditional (and then post-processual) archaeology on the other. But cultural anthropology itself could be called “holistic” because of its interest in every aspect of human life; for example, Kelly and Thomas wrote that “Anthropologists believe that the best understanding of human conditions arises from a global, comparative, and holistic approach” (2010, p. 22). Recently, the term was used as a synonym for interdisciplinary; for example, Longo and Iovino (2003) called “holistic” an approach to the study of paleolithic sites integrating the results

of various fields of research (the origin and characterization of raw materials; stone tools technology; wear-traces analysis; archeozoology; and taphonomy). The Sagalassos project directed by M. Waelkens (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) from 2007 is another example, as is the symposium on holistic archaeology that he organized in 2008.

More often, but not always, the term “global approach” has had a worldwide geographic meaning, for example in the series of volumes published by Uppsala University from 2002 (*Studies in Global Archaeology*) and by Blackwell (*Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology*) from 2003, whereas another ongoing editorial enterprise, (*The Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*) highlights the contemporary worldwide communicative possibilities of a dynamic online environment. Conceptual aspects, in a post-processual perspective, were then pointed out in *Global Archaeological Theory: Contextual Voices and Contemporary Thoughts* (Funari et al 2005). Finally, some research projects or conference programs seem to use the term “global approach” in various kinds of interdisciplinary projects (e.g., the Global Archaeological Field Project in Tuscany carried out by the University of Pennsylvania Museum and Cambridge University).

Several years ago, together with G. Recchia, the term “global” was used in the title of a paper “Towards a Global Functional Analysis” published in the proceedings of the “Prehistoric Technology 40 Years Later: Functional Studies and the Russian Legacy Conference,” Verona 2005 (Cazzella and Recchia 2008). The term was used with a specific meaning, informed by an anthropological view of the past and directing research towards the reconstruction of whole cycles of activities, which were also carried out in different places and times, implying the interconnected use of several classes of artifacts and natural elements. That paper aimed to go beyond technological and functional studies dedicated to specific categories of archaeological materials (stone, bone and antler, pottery, metal, etc.) by integrating various data, in order to understand entire activities archaeologically recorded by means of very different kinds of data. That conference was specifically devoted to functional studies; conceivably, the global perspective could be much more global too. The analysis of activities (an important legacy from New Archaeology) is a basic step towards building a dynamic prehistoric archaeology, but it is not enough to decipher both a culture as a whole and the society sharing it. In a real global analysis, going beyond functional limits, intangible aspects obviously play a fundamental part. In fact, technological, wear-traces, and naturalistic analyses in themselves cannot do more than define the actions of the past. In order to come close to their cultural meanings and reciprocal interaction, further steps need to be taken. Ethnoarchaeology can play an important role in this cognitive process, not only as living archaeology observing the marks left on the soil by specific activities, but also as archaeologically oriented knowledge of the wide range of intellectual solutions given to the manifold aspects of human life in a society, including both economic activities and symbolic implications.

Both studies on the mentality of a whole culture, and on human sub-groups acting within the society, ought to be carried out using broad-spectrum suggestions that derive from ethno-anthropological research. As mentioned above, those human sub-groups are the “collective individuals” who are taken into consideration by a



Fig. 2.1 Comparison between the decoration of a traditional wooden vessel (1) and two Middle Bronze Age ceramic vessels (2, 3) from Belverde di Cetona, Tuscany (source: Puglisi 1959, pp. 2 and 13)

specific line of thought of the Agency Theory. It seems to be an oxymoron, but it is evident, generally speaking, that they are the only real individuals that we may be able to single out while studying prehistoric societies.

Two separate analyses belonging to different periods of Italian paleoethnological research nonetheless clearly express the kind of instances that are at the basis of this proposal. It should be specified that in these examples, the subject of peculiar cultural mentality is more explicitly discussed than that of the analysis of actions carried out by collective individuals, which could be further developed by continuing these two research projects along the same lines (Cazzella and Recchia 2013).

The first example is an extract from Puglisi's volume on the Italian Bronze Age, *Civiltà Appenninica*, which was written in the 1950s (Puglisi 1959). Its followers—as well as detractors—generally highlighted the economic pastoral aspect, but Puglisi's work (not without chronology mistakes: Cazzella and Moscoloni 2005) aimed to reconstruct a global framework of that culture, including symbolic aspects. His particular interest was in interpreting that society as a pastoral one, more for its ideology than for its economy, as the patterns of the pastoral life and related social values could have characterized them more than the diet of its members (substantially unknown in the 1950s). The reference to ethnographic situations (Fig. 2.1) was the stimulus for this hypothesis, but not the means

to demonstrate it. In this regard, Puglisi considered the persistence of pastoral cultural traditions in early Roman society mentioned by ancient written sources to be relevant (Puglisi 1959, pp. 102–103).

The second example is from a paper by G. Cofini, G. Recchia, and A. Cazzella (2006), where the problem of social conditions of exchange in prehistoric societies and the potential contribution of ethnoarchaeology to the same was explored. As a specific archaeological case study, the phenomenon of the Mycenaeans in Italy and their relationships with the natives was taken into consideration. The theme was less global than Puglisi's work, but it encompassed various aspects, from economy to ideology, in both societies. The stimulus for this study was a discussion of ethnographic contexts, but the analysis of the Italian Bronze Age case study had to be founded on specific archaeological data. The possibility that reciprocal exchange took place without a social and ideological symmetry between the partners was a central point of discussion in that paper. In the specific archaeological situation under examination, it was hypothesized that exchange between Mycenaeans and Italian natives was economically reciprocal, but the first (and perhaps both partners, each from his own point of view) considered themselves superior to their exchange partners (Fig. 2.2). The social and economic organization of Mycenaean society during the Palatial period seems to be at a much higher level of complexity than coeval Italian communities, presumably hampering a sense of equality between the two (Blake 2008; Cazzella and Recchia 2009). Also in this case, an ancient, non-coeval literary text, *The Odyssey*, could give us more of an idea of the feeling wavering between fear and contempt of Central Mediterranean communities in the Late Bronze Age's Aegean seafarers. Linear B texts do not give us clear clues about trade organized by palaces, and particularly about those trading with western destinations; a prevailing freelance-based trade system seems to be more likely. If this hypothesis is confirmed, a peer interaction between local elites and Mycenaean princes (Belardelli et al. 2005) to regulate reciprocal exchange of goods and artisans by means of Aegean merchants becomes unlikely. Moreover, the permanent presence of Mycenaean merchants and artisans resident in Italy, hypothetically fully integrated within local communities, does not currently have clear archaeological traces in Italian Bronze Age settlements and cemeteries. In synthesis, it can be argued that a contrasting mentality between Mycenaeans and natives did not allow a social and ideological symmetry either between the elites (if they really existed in Italy in that period) or between the common people of the two areas, even though reciprocity in economic exchange (the reciprocal interest to carry out exchange) is highly likely.

These examples, beyond any specific criticism on single elements, show that it is possible to aim to reach the most intangible aspects of prehistoric socio-cultural systems, such as the mentality of their members, using the contribution of ethno-anthropological research in a way that is specifically finalized for archaeological means. The reference to written sources (also non-contemporaneous with the situations to which they refer) might be of use in this challenge, obviously implying expressions of an ancient mentality, but perhaps this can be extended to the analysis of totally "mute" case studies as well.

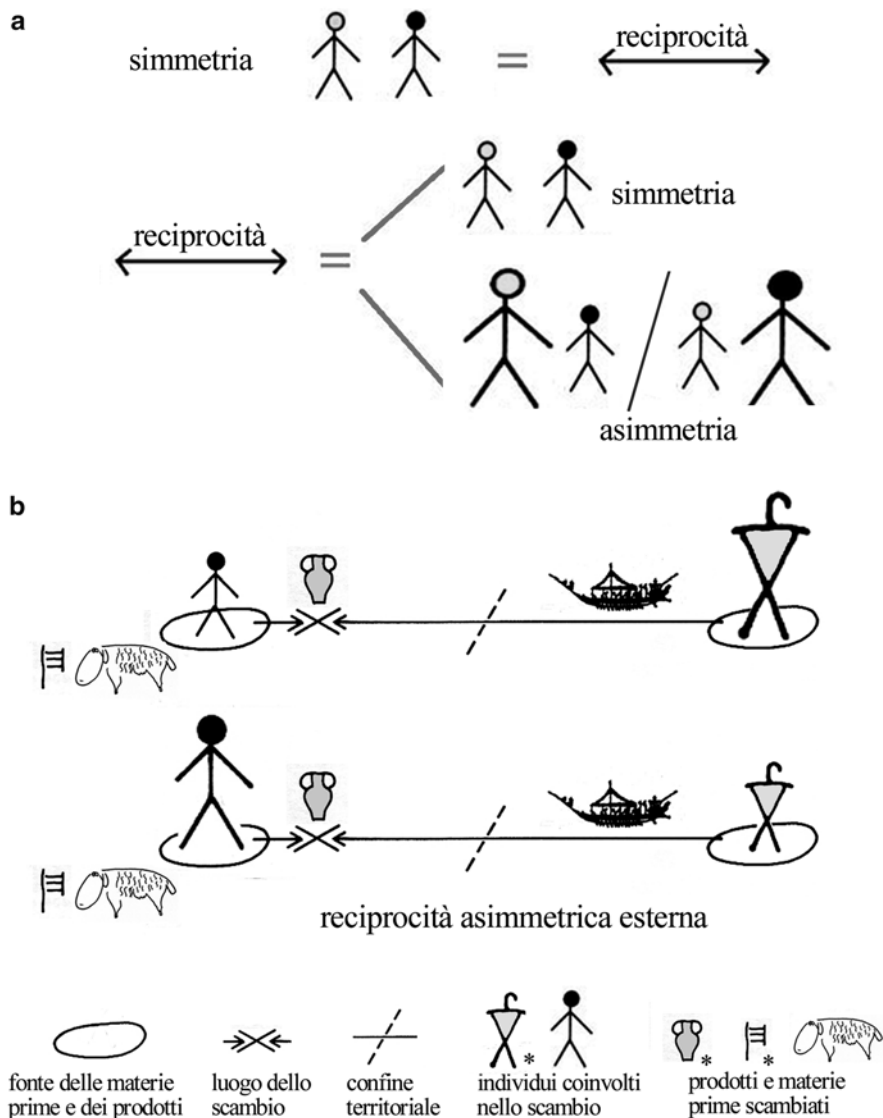


Fig. 2.2 (a) A scheme synthesizing the relationship of reciprocity—symmetry/asymmetry between exchange agents. (b) A scheme specifically visualizing the hypothesis of an outside asymmetrical reciprocity between southern Italian communities and Mycenaean seafarers. Translation of less perspicuous Italian expressions: fonte delle materie prime e dei prodotti=source of raw materials and goods; luogo dello scambio=exchange place; confine territoriale=boundary; individui coinvolti nello scambio=individuals involved in exchange activities; prodotti e materie prime scambiati=exchanged goods and raw materials; asterisk (*)=images from linear B writing. (source: Cazzella et al. 2006, Fig. 1)

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