

RESPONSIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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ACTOR NETWORK THEORY, CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGS AND SOME ASPECTS OF NON-ORDERED SPACE: EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF RESPONSIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study is informed by a combination of Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Interpretivist Anthropology. From this perspective, it examines how the various actors or 'actants' involved in struggles over the redevelopment of the city's urban core, constructed meaning themselves in representing what the city and the built environment should be and justifying their actions in practice. Using a qualitative case study methodological approach, the study focuses on the urban traditional core area of Akure, Nigeria that comprises the transformation of its ancient market precinct called 'Oja Oba'. Participant observation and structured interviews were conducted using convenience and snowball sampling methods in addition to questionnaires administered in the study area. This includes the examination of the interaction within the material environment of the city through the prism of the role of actors (government officials, planners, politicians) involved with the built environment. Findings suggest that what has motivated their actions in practice stands in sharp contrast to the needs and expectations of the general populace. This paper further expatiates on the understanding of negotiation and conflict that ensued during the interaction and the blurring of boundaries within the material environment of the city that impacted on the ordering and non-ordering dichotomy of the urbanity. The paper concludes that theoretical and cultural interpretation impacts the built environment, its form, character and spatiality. This must itself be understood as an agent or actant in the struggle, in as much as it both enables and constrains human activities.

Keywords: anthropology, actor network theory, built environment, modernity, tradition, non-ordered urban space

INTRODUCTION

Urban transformations are born out of conflicts, differences or resistance and that urban transformation today in Akure, for example, might have taken a different outlook or form if the process and the actors involved had been somewhat juxtaposed (Mulkay, 1972; 1974; Stephens *et al*, 2008). Bijker (1997:48) maintained that "development is all part of social process" and that actors are the carriers of this process. Innovations are carriers of new technologies, a resultant effect of social activity based on sets of strategies adopted by the actors wanting to maximize their symbolic profit (Latour & Woolgar, 1986:205; Bourdieu, 1975). In order to fully comprehend the processes, and internal workings, within a social group such as the food market and the city, there are suggestions to examine problems and solutions, internal disturbances, links and communications, and how conflicts were resolved (Pinch & Bijker, 1987; Mackenzie, 1987; Callon, 1987). This is where Actor Network Theory (ANT) is appropriate in understanding an anthropological entity such as a city's urban transformation and processes.

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Actor Network theory (ANT) can be defined as a unique approach to social theory that present a way of 'thoroughly exploring the relational ties within a network' (Latour, 2005). Network has to do with the associations formed or created by actors as "they (actors) define and distribute roles, and mobilize or invent others to play these roles" (Law and Callon, 1988: 285). Cressman (2009:2) observe that ANT provides the researcher with tool to better understand the 'complexities of our heterogeneous world'. Actor Network Theory (ANT) is different from all other social theory approaches by its consideration of both human and non human actors as equal within a given network (Latour 1987; Harman, 2009; Law, 1994; Odeyale et al., 2012). The identity of both the human and non human actors is defined by their interaction with other actors (Callon and Latour, 1981). ANT studies the complex relationships that exist between actors (or actants) by 'following the actor' within a network (Latour, 1996:373; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Bijker, 1997). According to Callon (1987: 93) an 'actor-network' is "simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements and a network is able to redefine and transform what it is made of". ANT considers the primary actors as network builders, through whose eyes they interpret the process of network alliances and relationship.

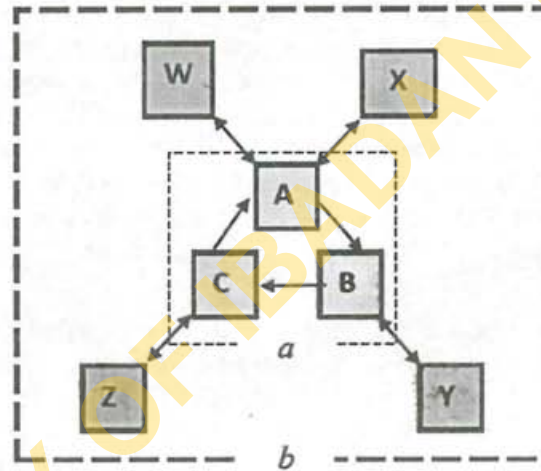


Fig.1: Analysis of the relationship between actants operating within different scales in a network. (Adapted from Callon, 1999)

To better place the analysis of the market built environment within a definable context (see fig.1), I have grouped actants into related networks operating within spatial and institutional settings at different scales. At one level are, (A) market traders, including market associations and leadership, (B) market users or buyers and (C) market suppliers, all of whom operate within the spatial and institutional boundaries of market processes. But this network itself exists within another, broader network not concerned wholly or even primarily with market processes. The actants within this network include (W) professionals, such as architects and planners, and policy makers or government officials and (X) politicians, (Y) the various ethnic groupings that constitute Ondo State's and Nigeria's diverse population, and (Z) non-market-specific groups and organisations in the international arena who nevertheless bring influence to bear upon local market actants, including multilateral organisations like the UN and the WTO, the International Organization for Standardization, bilateral organisations like Department for International Development (DfiD) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

²An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of action

Therefore, the use of questionnaire in this study is not based on the positivist view/ approach, and as such the treatment of data set collected is not strictly statistical. In this regard, the overriding choice of non-probability sampling method neatly dovetailed into the overall theoretical basis of this study that involves the examination of 'emerging concepts' and relationships of networks in urban issues (Barbour, 2001; 2008:13; Alford, 1996). Hence, during the field research, *convenience sampling was particularly useful in the administration of the questionnaire, and interviews are conducted based on the snowball sampling principles as put forward in Bijker's (1997) notion of "following the actor"*. Also examination of data set follows the delineation of an 'analytical range of study' that requires the drawing of artificial boundaries discovered in a continuous search for realities within the 'confused overlap' of networks and endless translation and negotiation that happens both human and non-human actants. In other words, we can say that the "settlement of an actor network is not defined *a priori*", but emerges from the complex, open set of relations and from the characteristics of the elements that are part of the actor network" (Cordella and Shaikh, 2006:11).

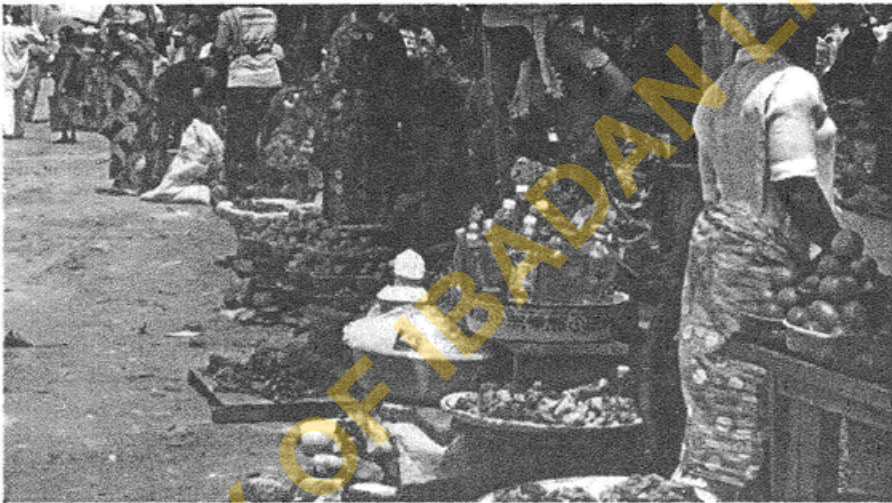


Fig. 2: Example of Non-Ordered Space: Informal sellers at the traditional main market Oja Oba in Akure. Source: Researcher.

ORDERED/NON ORDERED SPACE: REACTIONS AND RESPONSES TO CHANGE IN THE URBANITY

In the consideration of the desire of elite to modernise the urban core area of Akure that includes the old traditional market built environment The treatment of informal traders or hawkers by politicians and government policy makers is another case of the problematisation of beliefs and practices resulting in conflict and negotiation amongst actants in the market network. Urban informality is much discussed in the literature and can be defined as economic activity that occurs outside government regulation, planning or oversight (Gregory et al., 2009; Dickinson, 1998; Lefebvre, 1991; 2003; Giddens, 1990). It is often illegal, but can be widely practiced in society and subject to less or more legal sanction and enforcement by the authorities.

Hawking is a prominent and long-standing aspect of all traditional markets in Ondo State, and is not strictly legal. In the normal course of events, the authorities, police and officials, routinely harass hawkers but in the so-called modernisation process there was a more concerted attempt to displace hawkers and all forms of informality from both the main Oja Oba market and from other satellite markets in Akure. The interview extract in Box 1 demonstrates that there is a conflict between formal

HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It is imperative to ask the following core questions or put forward the hypothesis that clarify the precise nature of the problem:

- Are decisions being made about the way the market is organised by one powerful segment of the population, whose lifestyles are becoming increasingly westernised, marginalising another whose lives are more embedded in tradition?

Other research questions include the following, how much has the developments around the market built environment influenced or affected the political, culture and social transformation of the Akure metropolis? Are there irreconcilable conflicts, or negotiable relationships, within the varying participants of the urban core users and the marketplace - consumers, land owners, market stall holders, government officials and traditional communities?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Following Mead (2000: xviii), this study involves four methodological stages, (1) an exploratory stage, in which research questions and hypotheses are formulated; (2) a confirmatory stage, in which research questions and hypotheses are tested and data collected; (3) an analytical stage that involves establishing "proportional relationship within cultural materials or among members of, or groups in, a society" and (4) a stage of experiential verification in which changes seen or observed are juxtaposed or contrasted with hypotheses that has been developed and of which proportional relationships have been drawn.

Hence, structured interviews and participant observation are carried out using convenience and snowball sampling methods (instead of probabilistic sampling), in addition to exploratory questionnaire survey. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998: 41) non-probability sampling is suitable to research if it has specific research questions covering emerging concepts and discovered relationships. However, Bryman (2004:87) points out that the use of non-probability sampling may appear non-representative which "implies that some units in the population are more likely to be selected than others", and identified two types of non-probability sampling techniques which are the *convenience sampling* and the *snowball sampling*. Although the notion of representative sampling is good and its importance is pervasive in literature, Silverman (2006; 2010 and 1998), argues that research mainly driven by a qualitative approach "does not concern itself with statistical range because it is not theoretically necessary" (1998:70). For instance it does not matter if it is 20 Ijaws or 2 Ijaws that are numbered among the respondents in a survey. As Silverman further points out:

Sacks argued that the validity of a piece of research did not depend on how a dataset was selected but on the theoretical derived quality of the analysis. But this does not mean that Sacks totally dismissed quantitative researchers concerns with how phenomena were distributed... This means that his interest in distributions were not statistical. As he put it "so instead of just counting the range of places something goes...see if you can come up with an account of why it goes there, some explanation or proofs"...(1998:71).

¹At the exploratory stage of this research, a survey was carried out in Akure. 400 questionnaires are distributed, but 303 questionnaires are returned from the respondents and collated; with 75.6 percent response rate from the respondents. Because the questionnaires are done face-to-face, in reality it took the form of what can be regarded as "structured interviews" and that accounts for the high response rate.

and informal sellers. An informal seller or hawker who has blocked the view of her goods is interfering with the formal market seller, who is paying rent for her store. The woman exclaims, "What? If she stands there long enough, a crowd will soon gather, which means a passerby would not see or notice my displayed wares", because informal sellers are in direct competition with formal traders and often obstruct their business when choosing prime locations. Hawking and informality in the display of wares has always been a feature of markets in Nigeria and, try as they may, official attempts at suppressing informal trading have never been successful. The provision of formal 'modern' shops and stalls has not lessened this long-standing practice. Evidence of the fact that informality has carried over into the new market grounds is clearly visible in fig. 2 (see also fig. 3 and 4). There are informal sellers right in front of the new market structures erected to combat this kind of unsightly display of food items. The market woman has spread her food items - plantain and palm oil - into a space reserved for parking cars. Meanwhile, the adjacent formal stall itself has been left unoccupied by the market women who cannot afford the rent.

Box 1: A Day in the life of a Fruit and Provision Seller at the Main Market in her Own Words

I thought I would arrive early at my provision stall today. So I could make up for the yesterday losses. It was the day after 'du du du' festival at Oja Oba [the King's mark or the Main market]. The du du du festival is a one day traditional festival carried out in Akure market that is celebrated for its ritual importance and for progress in commerce. During the festival the youth of the city followed the city's traditional chief priest Asoga around the core zone of Akure and were free to loot any shop that is opened on this day. Hence, the name *du du du* which literally translates as *grab, grab, grab*. On this day traders or sellers in the market that do not believe in this traditional event or subscribe to it because of their religious persuasion, use to stay out of the market. My next stall neighbour apparently was here yesterday as I could see the tell-tale sign of her participation in the festival. She had left wrapped stones on her outdoor shelves disguising them as wares. The palace boys must have been disappointed... I wonder why she goes through such trouble, I simply felt not showing up at all would have solved the problem, rather than inventing tricks or could there be a reason for it? Who knows? What I sell comprises of fruits (oranges, pineapple and cashew), canned foodstuff/ingredients (for fried/Jollof rice), milk/powdered, butter, maize, beans and corn flakes were displayed to my right and on the left shelves. The whole idea is to make them very visible to passers-by. A young girl had arrived opposite my stall and was displaying fresh fish at around 8.30am. What? If she stands there long enough, a crowd will soon gather, which means a passerby would not see or notice my displayed wares. I walked straight to her and asked her to shift her fish stuff and find herself another spot. I hope I am not been wicked. I can appreciate her plight not been able to afford a stall and all that..., but I needed to make up for yesterday's shut down today. She probably wants to do a quick sale here before the patrol officers arrive in about an hour!

Source: Interview Extract (Odeyale, 2014a, b)



Fig. 3: Informality carried over into the new market grounds. It is clear the market sellers do not want to be 'boxed up'. Notice also the patronage coming from the middle class buyer on the right. Source: Researcher



Fig. 4: Typical day at the main market of Oja Oba. Notice in the foreground of the picture the barrier to prevent illegal display of foodstuff etc and the informal traders jumping over this to display their wares - peppers, tomatoes, garri and even mobile phones. Source: Researcher.

Box 2: A Day in the life of A Middle Class Woman Shopper at the Akure's Main Market

Of course, I had to leave my new saloon car, quarter of a mile before the market; it was the nearest parking place I could find. I then set off towards the big Oja Oba market on foot. I needed to get some leaves, fresh meat, tomatoes and peppers to cook dinner. On the right side of the road were these busy sales going on DVD's, CD's, players arranged beautifully. I've always wondered about the authenticity of these items. But there is a small crowd gathered to check out these products. I approached cautiously, clutching my bag under my armpit until I had passed the scene. 'Humph, that was easy...' I need not have feared anyway, there was a police patrol van and two members of the force just ahead. As I approached them, the area around their van seems to have been cleared, 'oh where is everybody...?' Someone seems to have left a tray of ripe plantain in a hurry. Aaah, the sight of the approaching van had made them scurry back inside the market and this unlucky seller must have had to leave her tray of plantain in order not to get caught. But the two policemen remained unperturbed, ignored the tray of plantains as if it was not there and I could see heads peering through the woods to look at the recently vacated place. They all wanted to avoid being fined or locked up! I could not stay too long to find out. My meat seller was just across the other end of the road ...oh the mud and the throng along there..., but he has good meat at a reasonable price. '...Fresh oil ma' ...I have good palm oil...and I will add some more...' from my left and right. Of course I would need oil but dare I wait to buy from her? I don't want to miss the meat; otherwise I wouldn't get my choice. Here comes this young lad with a tray of big fresh ugwu leaves [vegetable leaves] dripping with water. I have not seen ugwu this fresh in a zillion years. I must get some. I ran after him, otherwise I might lose him...; bargaining for the best price took another five or six minutes and I had five bundles of leaves peeping through my bag as I walked on to the meat seller. From three yards away I could see I was late, awww... he smiled at me, '...my customer... welcome... e ti pe e [translation: you are late], but what would you like?' 'This meat is two kilos...' ok, he called his friend, 'please take her to Aremu, say she's from me'. I thanked him. I had to follow the other guy, I think to myself '...who must have been...and who is he really'. I don't know but I followed him as my customer advised and he took me to another meat seller called 'Aremu'. Aremu still had what I wanted, so I had my meat chopped and ready to go. The way back was not quite as busy as it was earlier on. I picked my fresh tomatoes, peppers, crayfish and oil along the way as I moved on until I got all the items on my list. Saddled with three bags of shopping and quite a distance to my car, I had two options of transportation to my car, take a cab or a motorbike - the fares are around the same price. With all the heat and sweat rolling down my neck with my walking in the market, I chose the latter and off we went in the direction of the park, where my car awaited me. And that is Tuesday dinner sorted.

Source: Researchers' Interview Extract B (Odeyale, 2014a)

The question arises as to who is fooling who? At least on the surface, the market sellers and hawkers appear to be winning in the battle over market modernisation. They are adept in negotiating the barriers designers and officials place in their way, meandering all over the 'ordered' 'neat' environment created by the designers. Instead of the 'orderliness', the market seller's unspoken actions exhibit a preference for spontaneity and fluidity, that is absent from the design imposed on them by the professionals. Middle class buyers are also complicit in supporting this informality - notice the patronage of the middle class buyer in the image (in fig. 3).

CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGS, BLURRING BOUNDARIES AND CONSEQUENCES ON URBAN REALITIES

There appears to be a blurring of what are 'legal' and 'illegal', 'right' and 'wrong' here. The description and observations expressed in Box 2 highlight both the formal and the informal nature of the traditional market as experienced by a typical middle-class woman. Most of the discussion is concerned with the difficulties involved in managing a normal day's shopping in a traditional setting, such as where to park, where to find good food items and issues of security. On the one hand, this shopper presents informal interactions in the market as problematic. In particular she makes reference to her feelings of insecurity when passing groups or crowds that may be buying and selling items illegally. She remarked "I approached cautiously, clutching my bag under my armpit until I had passed the scene". Also she highlighted the transient and uncertain nature of hawking in the market, where illegal sellers run away at the slightest indication of a police presence (see figure 5). This means she is never quite sure what might happen from moment to moment. However, on the other hand, she also highlighted some of the benefits informal trading affords to shoppers. The hawkers offer a wide range of produce and often have the best goods, such as the boy that hawks vegetables like ugwu (the meat seller is 'formal' whereas the vegetable hawker is 'informal'). Because the meat seller is official (and legal) he is seen as reliable; he has a fixed spot or point of sale where the customer can meet him. The meat seller also expects the customer to turn up at certain times and to come regularly. He can say to the customer "you are late", showing the formality of the selling arrangement.

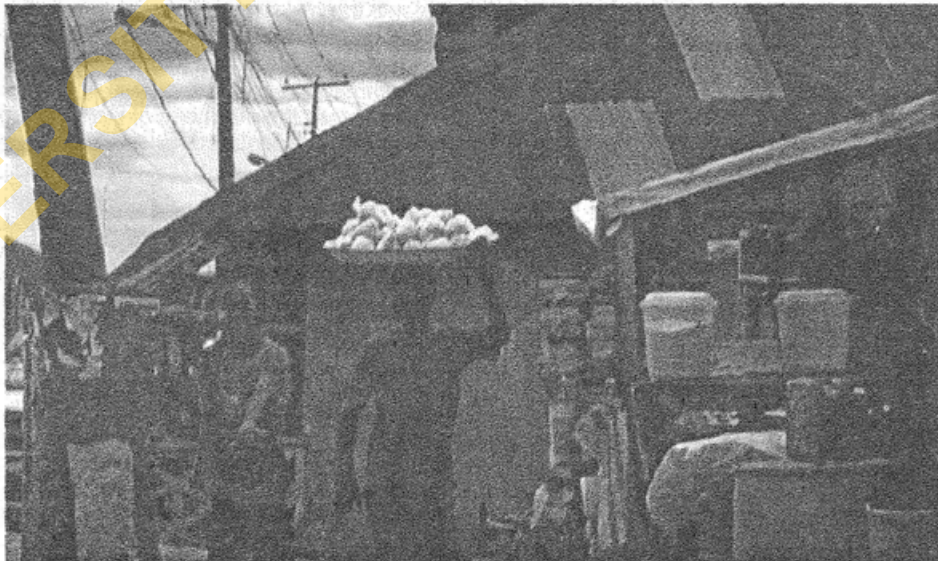


Fig. 5: The 'boy' hawker. Source: Researcher.

On the part of the woman, she knows where she is going and she knows the seller will be there and will be expecting her. Hence, there is a sense of order and regularity to the interaction and negotiation process. In contrast to this, the informal negotiation or interaction between the woman and the vegetable hawker is not ordered; it is spontaneous and uncertain. She does not know the boy in question and has not made a prior arrangement to meet with him. She sees him by chance. She does not even know if he will run away in the middle of their transaction to avoid the police. However there is a palpable sense of excitement in her description of the interaction, which reflects the same sense of enjoyment in the spontaneity and opportunity of the informal marketplace that we saw expressed by other market users earlier, 'here comes this young lad with a tray of big fresh Ugwu leaves (vegetable leaves) dripping with water. I have not seen Ugwu this fresh in a zillion years. I must get some. I ran after him...otherwise I might lose him....' (Box 2).

Middle class people because of their desire to see an ordered society in some ways frown upon the prevalence of hawking. Conversely it is also tacitly supported by them. The woman ran after the boy in order to buy the "hawked Ugwu" not only because she was afraid he might flee the police, but also because she knows his goods will sell quickly. Notice the expression used by the woman to justify what was effectively an illegal transaction, "I have not seen Ugwu this fresh in a zillion years". In this instance, his vegetable leaves were far fresher than those displayed on the vegetable stalls of the formal market sellers, which were likely to be stale and dry.

... bargaining for the best price took another five or six minutes and I had five bundles of leaves 'peeping' through my bag as I walked on to the meat seller.
(Box 2)

The above extract underscores the beauty of an apparently chaotic situation and the 'naturalness' of the informal market scene. The beauty of this 'natural' informality and non-ordered space configuration is something which many respondents expressed a longing, in comments they made during the course of this research (interviews and survey I undertook), and it is something which is intentionally being eroded in the modernisation of traditional markets and the urban core area by the current government and politicians. Obviously, there is an ongoing conflict between the Government elites and professional designers responsible for 'modernising' Akure and Ondo State's markets and the market's intended users.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that part of the problem with the built environment is rooted in the way that different groups act in accordance with differing interpretations of the world. It is clear from the statements of formal traders and from the pictures of trading shown above, that actors or users involved in the transformation of the urban built environment such as the market sellers, whether formal or informal, do not want to be confined within the rigid formal structures provided by professional designers and middle class elite. Many of them feel like the proverbial "fish out of water" in these new 'modern' environments. And, though middle-class shoppers may frown upon informal hawking and the messy, chaotic nature of the traditional market, equally they appreciate its spontaneity and the opportunities it affords to purchase a wide range of goods as well as goods of high traditional quality. Given that informality is an ever-present feature of the market built environment and tacitly supported by buyers, one needs to ask whether the designers missed an opportunity. They could have properly accommodated informality and thus controlled, at least to some extent, the activities of an underclass of sellers who provide much of the trade in the marketplace and determine much of its urban character. The way forward is by considering the interest and the kind of cultural basis for what the people do and planning within the context of what is actually achievable.

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