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Blazing a trail while lazing around: Knowledge processes and woodfuel paradoxes?

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Using autobiographical experience with reference to woodfuel research in two locations in West Africa, this paper illustrates how knowledge processes influence what can be produced as knowledge; how such knowledge is actually produced; and what is eventually produced as knowledge. However, although it explores the various roles which knowledge plays in the social relations at particular historical moments in the personal and professional development of a single individual, the questions this subjective experience raises are of wider import: whose knowledge matters? how do certain knowledges get suppressed or are denied, while others are privileged? In turn, this raises additional questions concerning the ways in which research and practice are mediated through local research, policy and development prisms. In a general sense, the paper is about the way in which woodfuel philosophies, methodologies and practices are constructed, modified and maintained in existence as knowledge; and a reminder that such knowledge processes cannot truly be understood in isolation, but need to be situated within complex, diversified contexts of individual agendas, group strategies, etc, as well as in multiple sites of production.

Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on processes of knowledge production which are illustrated by, and grounded in, autobiographical experiences in the study of woodfuel in West Africa. Firewood and charcoal continue to be the only fuels commonly available to, and affordable by, most rural and (often not so) poor urban populations in places like Africa. Individuals and organisations in (energy) research and development have long highlighted the need to further advance knowledge of, influence policy toward, and enhance the effectiveness of intervention in this most basic of livelihood resources. Consequently, I am interested in how knowledge production processes attempt to regulate what can be produced as knowledge; how such knowledge is actually produced; and what is eventually produced (and ‘normalised’) as knowledge. I explore, in other words, how knowledge as a social activity is produced, valued, used and contested in woodfuel-related academic and development practice.

The paper’s main aim is to demonstrate how knowledge was (and continues to be) mediated through academic, policy and development prisms, using as example two stages in my own personal and professional development. Following this introduction, therefore, I explore how knowledge works as contested practice, specifically *what can be produced as knowledge*, using academic geography as example. The main purpose of this section is to illustrate how the process of knowledge production can be policed, and knowledge practitioners ‘disciplined’, at the local or classroom level. In addition, it acts as a reminder that knowledge resides in a user rather than in a body of information, and that the user’s reaction to information is indispensable to its transformation into knowledge (Churchman, 1971).

A second substantive section represents knowledge production *as multi-local or transnational process*. Its main purpose is to show how knowledge is constructed at the intersection between development/policy networks and (university) academic/research structures, commonly beyond the classroom. Specifically, it highlights how loose associational practices link structures and institutions of different kinds with shared if variable/varied knowledge goals, aspirations and capabilities. Here, it is worth recalling that the capacity of knowledge to stimulate change, and spur people to action, derives from the cross-fertilisation of ideas, inspiration and information in dynamic contexts or environments (Pór and Spivak, 2000).

Section 3 offers reflections on the value of research for wood-fuel practice, and on what this interaction ‘normalises’ as both knowledge and practice. Its underlying message is that an integrated, multi-faceted

approach to research and practice is an absolutely necessary, although not sufficient condition for apprehending woodfuel realities in all their complexity. Furthermore, in providing some sense of context at the intersection between research and practice, this section might contribute to an understanding of the social construction of woodfuel knowledge as both research and development practice.

The article closes with a brief conclusion which recalls some of the key points of the discussion, notably a reminder of the role of power, politics and situatedness in knowledge processes.

Policing or regulating local knowledge production

Contextualising local knowledge production

It is the 1970s in one of Anglophone (West) Africa's older and better-known universities. I am registered as an undergraduate, following standard local procedure, for a broad-based (General) Arts degree which includes geography as one of three chosen subjects. As on campuses elsewhere, much academic debate (and teaching) is dominated by meta-theories of various persuasions. After an initial two years, and following a process of official departmental recommendation, the registration is upgraded into a single honours degree requiring a further two years of study. The extended workload includes a compulsory dissertation research project. I opt for geography, and not only because the prospect feeds into a personal fascination with travel and its presumed capacity for broadening the human mind. That the local geographical association publishes a scholarly journal serving a regional West African and wider professional community is an added attraction, as is the noticeable diversity of the local student population. Students are also encouraged to attend classes in basic/preliminary French or German; English, it seems, guarantees access to only a part, albeit an important part, of the published geographical literature.

In a period of intellectual and political ferment, the geography curriculum delivered by a multi-national staff, including a succession of short-term and visiting lecturers, offers a heady academic mix, combining structure with process; theoretical/conceptual courses with applied modules; and classroom-based teaching with laboratory practicals, day trips or excursions and residential field courses. Happily, too, even though modernisation thinking in various forms holds sway, there is still room for agrometeorology and biogeography, for example, to co-exist with dependency, and vulnerability/disaster analysis, among other perspectives. The subject can be offered as either an Arts or Science degree, with much effort being devoted to integrating the physical and

human arms of the discipline. The degree structure ensures a grounding, not only in human society *and* nature, but *also* in the interaction between the two for *all* students. There is a perception among students that, through encouraging problem-solving and promoting skills of synthesis/integration, geographical training improves employment prospects. This is of particular significance in the context of an increasingly competitive non-teaching job market, notably in the planning, policy and development arenas, where geographical practice is seen to address practical problems associated with socio-economic and environmental change at both national and more local scales.

At the same time, the global context is dominated by Cold War geopolitics and an intensifying energy crisis precipitated by steeply rising crude petroleum prices. Nationally, the beginnings of a political-economic crisis, which would engulf the state in the 1980s and after, are already evident. And, as the decade progresses, student activism grows as the 'leaders of tomorrow' (a widely-used description) aspire to become both a more visible and increasingly vocal force for wider societal change. More generally, both here and elsewhere on the continent, higher education continues to represent an established route to privilege and position, with students still constituting a minority elite, society's 'providers of modernity' according to some (Bathily *et al*, 1995).

But at the individual level, especially for a product of an extended and aspirational family, the meaning of education is two-fold. In addition to representing a valuable tool for realising one's full potential, it is also an individual acquisition. However, as acquisition, education is unlike material possession, for it comes with both a guarantee of lifetime ownership and an expectation of permanently responsible stewardship. A dissertation in the required hard-bound presentational format represents, therefore, a tangible early product of such an acquisition. Indeed, it is something *visible* to add to a steadily-growing if somewhat dispersed 'family' collection started many years previously by older relations, many of whom had gone on to (sometimes much) bigger and better things.

But first, a dissertation topic needed to be identified, discussed with at least one tutor, and (re-)worked into a detailed proposal whose academic merit required justification to the satisfaction of a panel of tutors during an oral defense. In trying to meet this requirement, however, I encounter first-hand the phenomenon of potentially restrictive academic gate-keeping. And, in negotiating its symbolic and material realities, I learn also about the opportunities and pitfalls of contesting the regulation of knowledge production at the classroom or local level.

'Disciplining' the boundaries of local knowledge production

Recent reflections on, and analysis of, a century of changing theory and practice in American geography are useful in this connection. These extend well beyond universal perennial concerns with raising the subject's public profile and securing its continued (maybe even expanding) appeal at both school and further/higher education levels. Indeed, as Murphy (2004) shows, long-running internal debates continue about how best to:

- make the discipline relevant to existing environmental, social and political agendas, even while maintaining its coherence within an increasingly diversified intellectual environment;
- emphasise the importance of resolving long-running tensions between specialisation and synthesis, on the one hand, and theory and methodology, on the other; and
- bridge intra- and inter-disciplinary divides with the aim of promoting, respectively, topical and philosophical dialogue and interaction with related disciplines.

In addition, there is increasing recognition that the precise nature of these preoccupations, and reactions to them, do not simply help to define the discipline; they are also heavily influenced by the (individual and group) identities, social locations, and life experiences of the discipline's practitioners (Hanson, 2004). Given such a context, suggests Sheppard (2004), predicting or legislating the trajectory of knowledge production in geography is fruitless, and attempting to enforce any monistic viewpoint either inside or outside the classroom often counter-productive.

Much of this is reminiscent of issues I was forced to grapple with half a world away in undergraduate courses devoted to histories of geographic thought and methods in geographic research. These preoccupations were/are thus shared to varying degrees by other national geography communities. Nonetheless, the enlightened approach to geographic practice favoured by Sheppard did not enjoy universal acceptance in the 1970s. It certainly did not appear to have informed the approach to academic guidance and research supervision of one of my tutors.

To start with, my search for a viable dissertation topic was heavily influenced by a combination of a new-found enthusiasm for indigenous knowledges and significant increases in the cost of woodfuel which were largely overshadowed by an official preoccupation with rising petroleum prices. As firewood and charcoal represented the most widely-used domestic, institutional (hospitals, schools, prisons, etc) and small-scale industrial fuels throughout the 1970s, I was convinced that a project on the local livelihood and wider policy significance of woodfuel production

and use possessed the potential for ‘making a difference’. Certainly, in contrast to the seemingly intractable (global) politics of oil explored in a range of academic and more journalistic titles of the time, the complex but identifiable workings of the local political economy of woodfuel seemed both relatively free of international politics and potentially amenable to planned intervention.

Initial reaction to the idea was both positive and encouraging. A particularly inspirational teacher helped me to think through the justification for such a project. And, in pointing out the possible environmental impacts of intense and/or unsustainable levels of localised wood collection, a second tutor succeeded in further impressing the intra- and trans-disciplinary nature of the subject on me. Significantly, both of these tutors left me in no doubt that while this was still largely uncharted research territory, at least locally, it was long overdue for investigation. In sum, even though important methodological and theoretical questions needed to be resolved, the proposal was inherently geographical in nature and boasted more than enough academic merit. In addition, it possessed the potential for blazing a small academic trail. It was all the more surprising, then, that the project came perilously close to being still-born, when its ostensible suitability *as academic and geographical practice* was questioned.

In the event, during a consultation with a third tutor which I had neither initiated nor requested, this academic adviser expressed serious doubts about the proposed dissertation topic, and was unequivocal in disparaging the idea. Indeed, the proposal was dismissed out of hand, in terms that I recall, almost word for word, nearly thirty years later:

Poor people collect firewood and burn charcoal with the intention of selling any surplus they do not use to others in exchange for cash. What else of any significance is there to know? Why, in any case, would you want to know anything about such matters? And exactly how can any of this be described as either geography or proper academic research?

In its place I was encouraged to consider researching import substitution industrialisation or small-scale manufacturing, a prospect which left me distinctly underwhelmed. As a last resort, but only if I insisted on researching a topic in the general area of energy geography, I could undertake a largely spatial analysis of the urban retail trade in refined petroleum products. The project could even have a secondary focus on the transformation of some filling stations, notably those located at or near major cross-roads, into multi-purpose enterprises stocking

household provisions, snacks, drinks and, in some cases, bar facilities. However, despite its evident attractions (do these come any better than the prospect of hanging around bars with friends in the name of research?), this concession did not go nearly far enough for me. Above all else, it deliberately excluded all mention of woodfuel or 'rural' energy.

To my tutor's credit, I was offered a detailed justification, to which I return in the following section, of why my preferred topic was not, in their view at least, considered of sufficient geographical importance to warrant academic investigation. I listened carefully throughout and, although I did not say so, found the explanation limited and ultimately unconvincing. At the end of the meeting, I expressed gratitude for my tutor's time, interest and attention. I was deliberately vague about my final decision and noticeably non-committal regarding my immediate plans. Significantly, I was too cowardly to disabuse my tutor of the notion that I had seen the error of my ways and allowed myself to be re-converted to the fold of 'proper geography'. In the context of time, place and unequal power relations, this was hardly surprising. No less surprising, however, was the presumption on the part of this senior tutor, that their point of view would inevitably prevail. Thus the seeds of a misunderstanding which would come to a head later were sown.

During the formal oral defence of my proposed topic, then, and much to the consternation of the tutor in question, my 'revised' research idea turned out to be little more than the original and, in this person's eyes at least, thoroughly discredited proposal on 'rural energy'. Thankfully, my calculated gamble, based on a canvassing of other tutors, that this person's restrictive approach to geographical practice was unlikely to be shared by the majority of people on the review panel, proved correct.¹ The proposal was approved, with a sole (and predictable) dissenting voice objecting to the very last, much to the bewilderment of the panel chair and head of department.² Undoubtedly, such a professional/public rebuke *in the presence of a student* was a manifestly unfamiliar and particularly unwelcome experience for somebody who almost certainly saw their only 'crime' as having expressed a professional interest in the progress of a student. From my perspective, of course, this had been done in an overbearing or ham-fisted way.

In hindsight, my role in precipitating this 'loss of face' demonstrated seeming ingratitude. In addition, it illustrated incredible naivety on my part. For, it did not only have the effect of alienating an influential local voice on a small campus which was to continue as my institutional home for a further year and a half. It effectively alienated somebody who, somewhat predictably perhaps, subsequently became my head of department. That the latter part of my undergraduate experience was memorable was due, in no small measure, to the general air of menace

that characterised all forms of direct contact with this particular ‘authority figure’. But in the wake of national student protests which had extracted major political-economic and governance concessions from a hitherto unresponsive state, the act of resisting an (in my view) unjustifiable attempt to discipline local knowledge production was perhaps a minor expression of academic (and, by extension, social) rebellion on my part that I have never regretted.

Nonetheless, in the light of this tutor’s constant reminder to students, both under- and post-graduate, that they could only become geographers after graduation, I could have done *then* with the reassurance provided by Eric Sheppard’s recent observation, that ‘[g]eographers, *like all agents*, frustrate and escape attempts to discipline them’ (2004: 744; emphasis added). Clearly, I did not need to be a geographer (in my tutor’s sense of the term) to contest the seemingly oppressive policing of knowledge production. In any case, such agency would only have been partly informed by disciplinary training. In addition, the nature of wider life experiences would also have influenced expectations and interpretations of disciplinary ethics and practice. And this would have applied as much in my tutor’s case as in mine.

Life experience as knowledge practice?

A useful point of departure is a reminder of Hanson’s (2004) suggested connection between the life experiences of geographers and the questions they deem sufficiently important to warrant research attention. What, for example, did the seeming lack of interest in woodfuel issues *in their own right* say about my tutor? Why did this person consider research on woodfuel unsuitable as a respectable academic endeavour? Did it, for example, really lack (all) intellectual merit in their view? On the other hand, how, if at all, could the study of woodfuel have been seen to threaten either the coherence/integrity or relevance of geographical practice? Was my proposal so (completely) devoid of applied value, for instance, as to be of no practical use to society? In sum, what *did* constitute acceptable geographical practice for this person, given the widespread recognition of a lack of a canon within the discipline? And what exactly was it that informed their attempt to demarcate and police geography’s boundaries in the way described?

The answers to these questions, gleaned from my tutor’s own words, are surprisingly revealing. First, was a seemingly unshakeable belief that the main appeal of woodfuel research for a geography undergraduate had to be the latter’s perception that it was a ‘soft’ option: an inconsequential subject/topic requiring little time, physical effort or intellectual resources to study, leaving plenty of time for ‘lazing around the place’. Second, was a reasoning that an interest in ‘traditional’ fuels was in some way

misguided. That student resources could (and should) be much better employed in researching subjects with a focus which could not in any way be (mis-)construed as encouraging cultural conservatism or 'backwardness'. And, finally, that at a time when the study of 'development-as-modernisation' (and its presumed teleological underpinnings) dominated social scientific thinking, a human geography project needed a focus which reflected this pre-eminence rather than highlighting the ruralisation of modern(ising) life.

At the very least, this professional vision held, a study with the dynamics of energy substitution at its heart would necessitate the acquisition of academic tools necessary for effective participation in ongoing intellectual and policy debates about development planning and service delivery. In contrast, concentrating on woodfuel consumption/use *per se* would not merely understate the emerging impact and continued potential of planned change. It would also reinforce the impression that an energy transition from 'traditional' fuel toward 'modern' energy had already stalled or was stalling. Such an impression would be both erroneous and undesirable in my tutor's opinion, which was itself partly informed by recent research on modernisation structures, processes and indices.

In retrospect, my obsessive initial focus on what I perceived as the (academically) unjustified rejection of my proposal meant that I initially overlooked the personal and professional philosophy driving this attempted disciplinary policing. The latter's overall purpose was, ultimately, *the production of a particular kind of knowledge designed to respond to a specific perception of geography's role in, and relevance to society*. Clearly, this went beyond simply facilitating student knowledge production of sufficient scope and depth, using demonstrably geographic tools of enquiry and analysis to satisfy degree requirements. It was arguably irrelevant that my proposal lacked neither intellectual merit nor practical value, and was most unlikely to have posed a threat to the coherence of geography. Or, indeed, that teams of students and lecturers in the Faculty of Engineering had already designed laboratory experiments to measure both the fuel efficiency of common fuelwood and charcoal stoves, and were already compiling data on the energy content and combustion properties of a variety of widely-used biomass and other fuels. Similarly, it apparently mattered little, if at all, that even these non-geographers could see the potential value of a geographically-informed synthesis of woodfuel production, exchange and consumption as a complement to their technological efforts.

As the eventual approval of my preferred proposal showed, however, this trajectory was not inevitable. Indeed, it serves as a useful reminder that life experiences and 'situated understandings' have a political

dimension (Sheppard, 2004). Put differently, knowledge production cannot truly be understood in isolation; it needs to be situated within complex, diversified contexts of individual agendas, group strategies, etc. Could my tutor's views on the role of woodfuel in social (re-)production, for instance, have come only from someone who, living in furnished university accommodation, used no 'rural energy' at all, and had probably not done so for a considerable period of time? Yet these views could have come, in part too, and judging from the outburst cited earlier, from an elitist interpretation of the purpose of higher education, and a combination of widespread intellectual and social snobbery in relation to low status activities like woodfuel production/sale. But as the dissenting views of academic colleagues occupying a similar professional and social location showed, even such widely-held attitudes were not universally shared.

Taking my own case to further illustrate such contrasting connections linking life experiences with the level of importance accorded woodfuel research, I was part of a previously wood-, but more latterly charcoal-consuming nuclear family, which also used kerosine for cooking. I also belonged to an extended family which had long owned a fully functioning, wood-burning commercial bakery. Nor was this all. I still wonder, for instance, how much of a lifelong impression the proximity of a favourite aunt's house to peri-urban forests made on me, notably the constant criss-crossing of her immediate neighbourhood and adjacent areas by wood collectors and sellers of all ages, including contemporaries and acquaintances. Did any of this have a conscious effect or direct bearing on my desire to research woodfuel, a non-elite activity, on its own terms and according to its own logic? Or, in so doing, to aim to render the ordinary less banal and the invisible more noticeable?

In short, and with reference to my tutor and I, our vastly different social positions contributed in no small way to the emergence of competing personal and professional philosophies. It was right, therefore, for the panel which reviewed dissertation proposals to have created space for potential exchange between these respective interests and perspectives. Indeed, this had the added advantage of resolving a nascent dispute which would otherwise have required a potentially divisive if somewhat needless choice between il/legitimate topics and approaches (Sheppard, 2004).³ To slightly paraphrase Hanson (2004), then, I was propelled into the field by a research subject which, in speaking directly to my life experiences, interested me as a (budding) geographer.

In the event, the project represented a baptism of fire, albeit a fire of my choosing. The resulting dissertation explored woodfuel in a small rural town within commuting distance of Freetown, the Sierra Leonean capital and location of my college campus. A recent re-reading reveals,

not surprisingly in light of the limited local availability of specialist literature at the time, expressions of indignation at the complete lack of local examples of woodfuel studies to provide guidance to a novice researcher.⁴ Nonetheless, given its foundation in first-hand fieldwork rather than a review of existing literature, the pioneering nature of the study was unbelievably liberating. I could (and, indeed, needed to) make a number of the rules up as I went along, buoyed by youthful exuberance and largely unencumbered, at the time, by the weight of anything remotely resembling a readily accessible body of established theory or research practice in woodfuel studies.⁵

Indeed, a research philosophy which has served me well over the years, a belief in doing what works rather than what it says (or, in this case, does not say) in books, was adopted out of necessity in these early days. Frequently, and more by accident than by design, my enquiries extended beyond the visible or public sphere of collection/buying/selling into the household's interior or domestic geography, its hidden domestic space, and the latter's conditions, relations, tools/equipment and techniques of use.⁶ Even to my then relatively untutored eye, politics and power were central to the workings of these diverse geographies, with woodfuel relations structured along lines of gender, age and wealth being particularly noticeable. In both a literal and metaphorical sense, and whether in forest collection sites, at the neighbourhood woodseller's in town, or in the household kitchen, there was plenty of situated geographical knowledge in evidence.

Both the original dissertation and a later, published version highlighted the bewildering variety of woodfuel-related issues encountered, even in a single, fairly small location like the one in question. The findings demonstrated the highly differentiated, as well as time- and locality-specific nature of the woodfuel markets, networks and other relationships that I was trying desperately to understand, describe and, to a lesser extent, analyse. Paradoxically, in light of my tutor's preference for a project with a primary focus on modern energy, the dissertation demonstrated the pre-eminence of woodfuel and other biomass fuels in local energy consumption mixes at every turn, and revealed that kerosine, gas and electricity held little or no immediate local appeal as woodfuel substitutes for cooking. Above all else, perhaps, rather than requiring me to choose between geographical approaches, woodfuel research imposed the necessity for adopting a fluid combination of geographical and other methodologies.

In this, it mirrored the complex, interrelated nature of everyday existence, of which woodfuel represented a central, if understated, part. Thus, contrary to initial impressions, playing football with adolescent wood collectors after school or drinking palm wine with adult producers

and/or sellers at the end of the working day, did amount to a bit more than simply ‘lazing around the place’. Indeed, while such participatory research may have been more relaxing, it was no less exhausting than collecting, bundling, headloading and splitting firewood, or carrying out a vegetation/botanical census, all of which I also tried. It was thus particularly gratifying to learn of the reported acknowledgement by my originally sceptical tutor, albeit belatedly, that the project did after all break new ground in local disciplinary terms.

In any case, I was already hooked on woodfuel research by this time, having already started postgraduate studies with the intention of specialising in the field. Significantly, this would highlight further facets of knowledge production and dissemination, notably that attempting to regulate what *can* be produced as knowledge was more than matched by negotiations concerning *how* knowledge is produced beyond the local level, as the following sections show.

Knowledge production as multi-local process

Placing knowledge production

This section develops the personal narrative of my initiation into woodfuel studies to include a consideration of knowledge production beyond the local or classroom level. I thus locate the lived experience it traces within a broader context of knowledge processes, whose multiple sites of production and use are shown to be only loosely and somewhat serendipitously linked by my concurrent participation in them. The context in question is one which saw fuelwood and charcoal questions, which had variously preoccupied foresters in Africa and elsewhere since colonial times, assume both a global public profile and international policy relevance following the quadrupling of petroleum prices in the 1970s.

Relatedly, this dynamic context, which was dominated by policy concern over a perceived generalised threat to forest and woodland resources by a large and growing demand for woodfuel which was assumed to be driven by a combination of poverty and population increase, also frames the continuing trajectory of my own career. Set in the 1980s, and located in multiple (continental, national and local) sites in a manner reminiscent of a transnational existence, this trajectory was closely, albeit incidentally, linked to the ‘disciplinary’ history of woodfuel studies, with its periodic bouts of introspection.

For me, postgraduate research was inextricably tied to the steady transformation in the fortunes of woodfuel studies in Sierra Leone. Thus

from a position of near-complete policy neglect up to the mid-1970s, woodfuel in Sierra Leone had become an object of scrutiny for three separate international expert or consultancy missions by the end of 1980, leading to a corresponding increase in the available local specialist literature. Significantly, too, given the limits imposed on government activity by the country's worsening economic situation, increased external funding from a range of sources became available for more broad-based research into energy use. At the same time, international higher education scholarships allowed a small number of postgraduate students to study for terminal degrees on woodfuel-related subjects in European universities.

Entirely coincidentally, this was all taking place as I was making the transition from under- to post-graduate study. And, somewhat fortuitously, was awarded an overseas scholarship by a sponsoring government interested in wood energy and forestry-related questions, both as local livelihood concerns and potentially significant bi-lateral commercial opportunities. I thus found myself discovering the joys and benefits of international conference attendance and academic networking; and the intellectual stimulation of advanced study in a specialist research centre with an established tradition of woodfuel studies, and library resources in several European and other languages to match. Generous field and archival research funds and travel expenses, on the one hand, and intensive field techniques and research methodology courses, on the other, encouraged the 'scaling up' of my study site from the small rural town of my undergraduate project to the national capital. Freetown was the country's largest, most dynamic and most complex woodfuel market; it was also the single largest electricity, kerosine and gas consuming centre.

I could also, as part of my thesis research, attempt a considerably more informed and, consequently, more assured critique of the plans, proposals and research findings contained in the growing body of literature devoted to local woodfuel-related questions. And, as I had spent my first year in graduate school compiling, annotating and analysing the still rapidly-growing body of academic and other literature on woodfuel and other forms of domestic energy in various parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, I could situate this local study within a sizeable academic corpus. It helped, too, that there were fellow postgraduates researching energy in a range of guises and locations spanning both these continents and a representative range of fuel/energy situations, and that I could access (and critically engage with) some of the non-Anglophone specialist literature.⁷

It was a far cry from having to resort largely to intuition or ‘common sense’ only two short years earlier, as useful a formative (and morale-boosting) experience as that had been. I could consult compendia of appropriate research methods and conceptual frameworks; had access to results of a detailed overview of national energy use patterns; was able to monitor progress with, and results from, woodfuel-related development projects underway; undertook, with the help of botanist colleagues, a cataloguing of firewood and charcoal species and, under the tutelage of engineer friends, determined their fuel characteristics. And even though, as Pór and Spivak (2000) have noted, ‘[b]ooks, databases, lists of “best practices”, helpdesks, etc ... are “information”, not “knowledge”’, they did influence both my review of the main pillars of the national energy policy for official intentions towards woodfuel, and questioning of key aspects of proposed woodfuel interventions. I did not, in other words, need to adopt an approach which, to borrow from Wisner (1987), would have depended solely on *either* ‘the literature’ *or* ‘common sense’ and which, as a consequence, would have been prey to the risk, at the very least, of a-historicism. In the event, the geography of knowledge production was equally worthy of critical attention.

‘Networking’ multiple sites of knowledge production

Knowledge production ranged across multiple sites. Although Freetown was the location of the thesis fieldwork, most of the planning for, and design of, the research took place in two European locations which served as bases during my postgraduate studies. Furthermore, a chance fellowship award funded full-time advanced (but not degree-earning) woodfuel research in the Kano area of northern Nigeria while I was still completing my doctoral studies. Thesis preparation was split between these various locations, with Freetown as the sole exception. Kano combined, for all practical purposes, an extension of my postgraduate learning experience with a valuable postdoctoral research opportunity. Indeed, a direct result of my first 18 months in Kano was that I became increasingly aware of the extent to which some of my ideas (and wider theoretical/conceptual thinking) on woodfuel had both changed and continued to evolve since I started work on my thesis, prior to going to Kano.

Here, an investigative immediacy fed by the proximity of ‘field sites’ to ‘report-writing desk’ was probably one reason why no actual thesis writing took place in Freetown. Another was the enlightened research leadership and sense of collegiality which allowed me a relatively free hand in pursuing my thesis and other research interests within the overarching framework of a project whose existence predated my arrival. At the same time, the more distant Freetonian woodfuel

realities I was supposedly documenting in my thesis were under seemingly constant and rapid change, particularly as the national economy declined and public confidence in the country's political and other institutions was eroded during the 1980s.

Paradoxically, too, while the excitement of research in Kano (in the homeland of a paternal grandparent) distracted me somewhat from completing my half-finished thesis on Freetown, the challenge of new insights engendered by such a radically different environment and society, with a much longer history of fuelwood research, cast some of my Freetown data in a completely new light. I became convinced of a two-fold need; first, to extend the period of historical coverage of the thesis; and, second, to alter the study's focus, in the light of evaluations of past activity, to privilege an assessment of planned and/or proposed (policy, planning, programme and project) interventions. These changes were to be to the detriment of general model-building and perspectival studies. Relatedly, in Kano, I encountered a group of academic engineers whose research interest in woodfuel technology complemented mine, and with whom I could explore ideas concerning woodfuel stove design, improvement and use, even though these had initially been formulated prior to my arrival in Kano with specific reference to my thesis research.

Undoubtedly, the otherwise isolating task of thesis writing was transformed into a considerably enlivened and enriching experience, thanks to the intellectually stimulating interaction generated by and within the context of collaborative group research in Kano. In the end, rather than simply restructuring the thesis, I decided to rewrite it from scratch, and remain convinced to this day that it was the better for it even if it stopped short of becoming a comparative study.

Nonetheless, the overlap of the Kano and Freetown experiences laid the foundation for subsequent comparative analyses of woodfuel in these contrasting political-economic and socio-ecological environments, something which the chair of my thesis examination panel encouraged me to undertake as the chance (and only substantive) link between the otherwise completely separate woodfuel experiences and initiatives of the two places. Prior to this, uncertainty over whether or not to include one of my proposed chapters in the final version of my thesis had been resolved in favour of retention, as my supervisor and I were convinced that, as the chapter's content had already been accepted for publication by a reputable journal, it had to have had some merit. In the wake of a successful thesis defence, during which the chapter was singled out for special mention, my supervisor's parting advice was to publish 'as much, as quickly, and as widely as possible' from the thesis, particularly if I had any plans to develop an academic career, which he had repeatedly encouraged me to seriously consider as a professional option.

Ironically, when substantive sections of the thesis later turned up, completely unattributed, in a consultancy mission report, this advice assumed new meaning, and not only because it was restated in a variety of forms by friends and colleagues. I came to realise, somewhat belatedly, that the attraction of such a strategy had always lain, not only in its effectiveness in ensuring the rapid dissemination of the results of my research (and, thereby, to ‘advertise myself’ on the job market), but also, and just as importantly, in staking a legitimate claim to my own work in the public eye. As this unfortunate experience was happily not repeated, the second piece of advice I had received from well-meaning friends in its immediate aftermath, to share as little of my work as possible prior to publication, was gradually forgotten; banished by manifold acts of generosity from the vast majority of friends and colleagues, new and old, and by the manifest value of professional reciprocity which was thus continuously reinforced. This was fortunate, for it was (and remains) the case that maybe more than many other research/policy areas, woodfuel research *demands* both multi- and inter-disciplinary expertise, and with it the imperative to (continuously) cultivate as wide a range of professional contacts and personal collaborations as possible. On balance, therefore, I could continue to operate on the principle, suggested to me early in my career, of doing what I knew or felt was right, knowing that I would sometimes be (hopelessly) wrong about people and situations.

Following the completion of my doctoral studies, and at the end of the research fellowship which had initially taken me to Kano, I stayed on in full-time **contract** academic employment. And, as this coincided with a period of critical evaluation of some of the main tenets of woodfuel orthodoxy within research, policy and management circles, these early post-qualification years were pivotal from a career point of view. For instance, this period saw the appearance of individual and joint publications on Freetown and Kano which became incorporated in ongoing theoretical and applied debates, along with contributions from other non-foresters. It also saw a significant increase in personal requests for comments on other people’s research; personalised invitations to conferences; journal requests for peer review of submitted manuscripts, etc. Indeed, given the cumulative impact of these developments, I could hardly have wished for a better start to a fledgling academic career which, fortunately, also benefitted from sympathetic mentoring, inspiring role models and good fortune in equal measure.

Reflecting now on the experience of operating within, and as part of, a transnational knowledge network-space, I am struck anew by the diversity of institutions, associations and individuals implicated in the exchanges and flows making up the various collaborations at work, and the latter’s role in facilitating the flexible knowledge production

processes recounted. For instance, the United Nations University (UNU), one of the first institutions to intervene in woodfuel studies, funded major research projects in northern and south-western Nigeria as nodes in a planned network of energy projects spanning the developing world (Moss and Morgan, 1981). It was in fact as recipient of a locally-tenable fellowship for advanced research in the northern Nigerian project that I first arrived in Kano, where I was based in an academic department in a local university, which granted me associate status with very generous institutional access privileges. Prior to this, I was already the beneficiary of a graduate scholarship. And, as I remained a registered postgraduate student for all but the final few months of my fellowship, I was concurrently part of three institutional academic structures based in three different continents, all of which were (in-)directly linked, via complex aid policies, development thinking/intervention and a variety of knowledge practices, to an interest in woodfuel. As Willard *et al.* (2005: 2) have perceptively noted,

[c]hanges in policy and practice require the establishment of networks of relationships, which facilitate the management of change-related risks and increase individual and institutional capacities to navigate the change process.

Not surprisingly, my interest in woodfuel, initially whetted in western Sierra Leone, outlasted my stay in Kano, by which time it had become a professional specialisation as well as personal preoccupation, and northern Nigeria had surpassed Sierra Leone as my main research focus. I continue to exploit all the connections above to the present day, although they now necessarily represent only marginal (rather than core) nodes in my woodfuel network-space which, in the spirit of the quote in the preceding paragraph, undergoes constant re-evaluation as part of a sometimes imperceptible process of change-in-progress. But it would take a combination of relocation in Europe; vastly increased access to ICTs; renewed international policy and development interest in woodfuel during the 1990s; and, finally, upbraiding by, and cajoling of compatriots, to prompt an attempt on my part to establish some semblance of parity in the research time, effort and other resources devoted to the two locations.

Knowledge production at the intersection of research and practice

In a timely reminder of the intersection of academic research with development practice, wood energy has been attracting renewed policy and planning interest in both places, as elsewhere, as a result of increasing concerns over the implications of a continuing dependence on fossil fuels for global warming and climate change. Woodfuel activity, which had reportedly only attracted funding with increasing difficulty as the 1990s progressed, appears to have benefitted indirectly as a result, as energy policy reviews and proposals underscore the continuing importance of woodfuel for local livelihoods and national energy budgets.

The British Overseas Development Institute's Social Forestry -- later Rural Development Forestry -- Network, which I have subscribed to since its establishment in 1985, captures this intersection of research with practice particularly well. According to its website (<http://www.odi.org.uk/fpeg/network/index.html>), the network was established with the aim of exchanging experiences in tropical forestry (including fuelwood) among its varied worldwide membership of practitioners (30%) and researchers (37%), and to bring these experiences to the attention of policy-makers in both government and international aid agencies (30%). It thus disseminated information in the form of thematic policy reviews, case studies and online 'grey literature', originally in English but, subsequently, also in French and Spanish. Notably, a focus on 'field activities in progress' was particularly valuable in 'often put[ting] the network years ahead of mainstream research in both content and interdisciplinary approaches'.

Certainly, its pre-publication dissemination of the research findings of the previously-mentioned Kano project, as both case study and grey literature, contributed in no small measure to the study's heightened profile. At the same time, SFN/RDFN material undoubtedly influenced thinking in Kano, in much the same way that the Kano research contributed to ongoing debates, at least judging by direct feedback, citation and anecdotal information. Indeed, it is difficult to overestimate the role of the SFN/RDFN, not only as a forum for new findings and comparative experience, which was its stated core function, but also, as the network website accurately notes, as 'a key agent in the mainstreaming of the importance of people in tropical forests [and woodlands]'.

As the experience of my initiation into woodfuel studies attests, specific woodfuel and more general forestry mainstreaming of the SFN/RDFN kind was (and remains) fully justified, given that '[w]hen new directions are first taken in a particular subject, there is often no obvious forum for new findings and nowhere to turn for comparative experience' (<http://www.odi.org.uk/fpeg/network/index.html>). Clearly, this is of value in highlighting how woodfuel questions are mediated

through local research, policy and development prisms, particularly in the absence of established theory and well-tested research and development practice. It is useful, too, as a reminder of how invaluable location-specific information is for reliable decision-making by policy makers, planners and managers, even those from unexpected quarters. Thus my graduate scholarship sponsors were particularly interested in research findings of potential commercial value, which they considered an acceptable tradeoff for the investment involved in training an overseas scholar at state expense.

And yet, my thesis research did not aim *simply* at generating readily ‘useable’, and mostly quantitative, information for either policy formulation or programme/project design and management, although some of the findings proved *potentially* useful for such purposes. For instance, based on this research and subsequent comparative analysis, I raised serious early (and continuing) doubts about the potential economic viability of a proposed large-scale, centralised, capital- and labour-intensive urban woodfuel and pole plantation, the most commercially-orientated of the policy proposals for state intervention in the Freetown woodfuel market. Clearly, my reservations were at odds, both with the vision of the scheme’s designers, and the judgement of policy makers who favoured the design. But even though they might have possessed a potential for adversely influencing perceptions of the scheme’s investment potential among development partners, these assessments are most unlikely to have contributed in any direct way at all to a failure, thus far, of the scheme to materialise in anything remotely resembling its original design or scale. In a similar vein, independent (and, in Kano, project) research was never driven by a single-minded quest for deriving general principles for model-building and theory formulation although, once more, relevant findings/results did feed into both these areas.

Significantly, however, none of this was allowed to detract in any way from the realisation that ‘[b]road generalisations about woodfuel use and availability at the regional, national and even subnational levels...commonly [e]d to biased assumptions and consequently to poor planning and ineffective action’ (Drigo *et al.*, 2002). Indeed, this represented a constant case for clearly identifying the implications of key research findings for woodfuel orthodoxy, particularly when they challenged such established wisdom. Often, challenges to common knowledge represented the end-product of ‘thinking outside the box’. But even when this was not the case, the focus of research was always woodfuel’s structure and functioning in its complex and dynamic whole, **regardless of the scope and scale of analysis**. Allied with a preference for ‘thick’ descriptions, this served as a constant reminder of the highly differentiated, as well as time- and locality-specific nature of woodfuel

economies, markets, networks and relationships. It was undoubtedly just such a realisation, currently (although not always) widespread in the literature, which led Moss and Morgan (1981: 1) to conclude that woodfuel as a research field was ‘of considerable scope ... touch[ing] on almost every aspect of the development process’; and the FAO (1983: 2) to caution that woodfuel interventions should, of necessity, ‘integrate social and technical analyses, as one without the other will not lead to effective approaches’.

Conclusion

The unifying theme of this article is that knowledge is as much about the conditions of its production as it is about content. In the varied and varying circumstances described, personal biography aids an understanding of the role of situatedness and context in knowledge production, even if only in retrospect. In short, woodfuel discourses, like all other discourses, are historically contingent constructions which make sense with reference to politics and power, through which relations, including knowledge relations, are articulated (Sivaramakrishnan, 1995). Fortunately, there is ample scope within the context of recent development and policy preoccupations with poverty reduction, Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), divestiture of public (including energy) utilities, and sustainable environments and livelihoods, to continue to examine such woodfuel discourses and their associated material practices, even while addressing wider energy issues in both Sierra Leone and Nigeria. Perhaps, too, the reflections in this article might possess some potential for acting as a counterpoint to discussions of the expansion and transformation of information technologies and communication networks, which have dominated much recent debate about knowledge production and dissemination.

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Notes

¹It is worth noting, in the spirit of full disclosure, that the tutors in question were completely unaware of the unfolding 'drama', and were simply asked what they thought of my idea for a dissertation project.

² Years later, one of the tutors present would say of this episode, ‘I couldn’t understand what was going on and put it down to something to do with local politics’.

³I suspect that my tutor would probably argue that divisive choices *were* made rather than averted.

⁴In truth, as bewildering as it was, the situation I faced was common to pioneer efforts in general.

⁵Books, reports and manuals outlining coherent woodfuel research frameworks and providing useful tips on data collection and analysis were not as readily available then as they were to become.

⁶Yi-Fu Tuan (2004: 729) has recently noted that ‘[p]rior to the 1970s, geographers seldom bothered with anything that could not be seen and photographed from the outside’, and remarked on their previous failure to penetrate interior space and cope with personal relationships. I was completely unaware of this at the time.

⁷The logic of the attempt to get us as undergraduates to develop some facility in French and/or German only became clear at this point.