

CLIMBING SCALE AND PLACE: GEOLOGICAL MUSINGS AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHICAL METHOD

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This paper retrospectively examines my two years of doctoral fieldwork in the palace of Kano, Nigeria, where I integrated my former training as a geologist into social geographical field research. At the time, I used this geological training to intuit what was methodologically required in a social context, never having had formal fieldwork training in geography. I have recently come to see that much of my methodological matter-of-factness derived from the fact that I had had years of undergraduate and graduate geological field training and that I had worked as a practicing geologist for several years (Figure 1).¹ The “naturalness” with which I approached the field was, in retrospect, surprisingly tempered by previous geological practice: collecting and analyzing aerial photographic images and settlement pattern maps, mapping in detail palace arrangements and material contents, picking out structural relationships in the landscapes, and so on. I now realize that my geological training taught me significant skills that translated into the worlds of the social—especially with respect to the many geological means for mapping out larger territorial histories of structural transformation by cataloguing the microhistories of rock fabrics.

My senior thesis on an area in Rhode Island and, later, my master’s thesis on an area in New Brunswick (Canada), for example, required that I make microscopic slides or thin sections of various rock fabrics from the Appalachian Mountains. These were analyzed for microspatial textures indicative of large-scale regional deformation over time. By charting the micropatterns of hundreds of thin sections on a circular map that translated microscopic measurements into a three-dimensional context, I could literally project, and hence identify, certain patterns of historical regional deformation. Such transform mapping revealed four phases of deformation and pointed to differential and historically staggered axes of geological compression. Later investigative work involving thick (fluid-inclusion) sections enabled me to determine overall formational pressures and temperatures of different rock fabrics.

In some ways, the variously sectioned rock tissues spoke in metaphorically holographic and fractal detail: Certain regional pressures registered readably in the microfabrics of rock samples chipped away strategically from sites in the area of interest; the microscopy of the rock fabrics, in turn, hinted that certain details of the events registered at still smaller scales of analysis. Indeed, using an electron microprobe on yet another type of rock section, chemical variations across discrete minerals could be discerned. This chemical information, along with other data, would

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