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Geography 696 - Debriefing paper

An Anthroprogenic Escape Route from the "Gulliver Syndrome" in the West African Savanna.

The Gulliver Syndrome paper was an interesting study combing qualitative and quantitative methods that highlighted rural agriculture practices and the primary drivers of land cover change. This paper provided an excellent overview of the research literature that has been published on West African savannas and fire. Laris develops his framework by critiquing past research and suggests gaps in research that exist because of the justification of colonialism that previous researchers embellished. This was one of the main ideas that I felt was important as a critical element in a study. Understanding the breadth of a literature review is extremely important in developing our own thesis study and this was the main element that I was hoping other students would grasp onto as well. As we embark on our specific literature reviews it seems to be of high importance that we analyze the specific format and content to deliver a clear message that effectively frames our study.

The natural experiment that Laris uses in this study seems to be very effective. Unlike his predecessors, he sought to include more natural variability in his study that would hopefully be useful in identifying environmental change over a certain period of time. The discussion of natural experiments and the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge may have also been a slight to the "conviction of colonial scientists" and their controlled experiments. While the literature review was very effective in helping the reader to understand how this field of study has developed, Laris inserts his methodology and ecological ideas into the review which focuses on application and implementation versus a more narrow focus on development of data sources. I felt this allowed me to compare and contrast the research that has been done in this field. The assertion that new research must consider savannas as "maintained" rather than "derived" as in previous work was interesting and allowed Laris to

frame his study. Using indigenous knowledge in this natural experiment allowed Laris to provide the reader with a very effective snapshot of the scale of the West African Savanna's specific climatic periods and document local practices that affect land cover and agriculture production.

Some of the issues or questions that I had and that were discussed in our previous meeting revolved around how Laris developed his qualitative data. Specifically, I wanted to know how the participants were selected and what types of historical data were used to develop this study. Another question was that criteria used in defining what "virgin" savanna is. Though fire is a shifting practice used by indigenous farmers I was unclear as to the scale of burned areas. I was however able to attend Laris's presentation the next day where he discussed this study in greater detail. Several of my questions were answered including how participants for the study were selected. The most effective way that Laris found in developing ideas on local knowledge and land use practices is to essentially ride his bike from the center of town where he stays outward to the savanna fringe. This creates opportunities for snow ball sampling, informal interviews and provides an ideal view of the landscape for which he is studying; his bike is vital to his methodology.

This paper certainly presented the critical elements that should be included in a research study. Comparing and contrasting the three articles we reviewed seemed very helpful to everyone in the class. We confirmed that Laris's article contains the seven key elements that any study should have. He was concise in his statement of purpose and framework for his methodology. Although I had to read this article several times and correspond with Dr. Laris via email regarding this paper, I think it provided a very clear picture of his objective in doing research in West Africa and how he developed his methodology to approach the study.

Laris. P. (2008). An Anthroprogenic Escape Route from the "Gulliver Syndrome" in the West African Savanna. *Human Ecology*. 36: 789-805.