

## **From play to knowledge: from visual to verbal?**

By Lucy Atkinson (University of Edinburgh)

This article relates my experiences using playful child-centred research techniques whilst undertaking research with Congolese refugee children in Zambia. Such techniques generate rich and varied information, and often in unexpected ways. They also create a format whereby the researcher and the children can interact and form relationships outside the usual social relationships of adult and child, researcher and informant. Given play's classification as enjoyable, social and educational, play as an aspect of fieldwork can be involved in a range of different ways of gathering and presenting anthropological knowledge. Through play we build different kinds of relationships, experience different kinds of interaction and therefore gather different kinds of information. Play in fieldwork therefore leads to different kinds of knowledge, but it also leads to knowledge presented in different forms—visual, embodied performative and experiential. Given the prioritisation of written forms in academia, the way in which these forms of representation can be used in the presentation of knowledge is not straightforward. The challenge to anthropology is how these different forms of knowledge are valued and translated.

---

### **Introduction**

This article covers two related issues, the first, 'from play to knowledge', concerns using playful child-centred research techniques and discusses what these can contribute to both research with children, and to ethnographic research generally. The second, 'from visual to verbal', addresses the post-fieldwork process of presenting the results of fieldwork: translating experience, and representing others. This relates specifically to the playful techniques discussed in the first section, as their translation and representation is necessarily affected by the fact that they involved visual as well as verbal expression.

I will argue that the value of playful methods lies in the way they can generate information and facilitate communication between people with different levels of verbal skills resulting from differences in native language, age or academic ability. Such methods can ensure that problems of verbal expression do not create a barrier to the recognition and communication of knowledge. Playful methods are also useful in constructing the kind of relationships that enable more ethical and informative research. They can help to reduce the disempowering impact of power relationships, and can facilitate relationships based on enjoyment rather than work, especially when used with children. Play helps children to learn and interact with others, but children also play for enjoyment and to spend time with friends. Social interactions between children that are based on play are often more autonomous than those based around work. When we use play as a research tool we are attempting to combine these elements of play, whether the research is with children or adults.

Issues of representation and 'translating culture' (in reference to Asad 1986) have recently been much discussed in anthropology; the particular relevance of this

discussion to my 'playful' techniques lies in the fact that the outcomes of my research were often visual representations. For such research there is therefore an added dimension, namely the challenge of translating and integrating images such as drawings and photographs into written analysis. Whilst there are various potential audiences and therefore varied means of presenting pictures, this article will focus on their presentation in an academic context. I will argue that although the inclusion of visuals in anthropological writing is unexceptional, I believe that these are not used to their full potential in the way that they are incorporated into written analysis. Transforming visual results into an academically acceptable format involves both a transformation of the material generated by the research, but also transforming the value of the visual in an academic context that prioritises the verbal.

The discussion of play activities in this article relates to those that I introduced to the children as research tools, and I will not be addressing the play activities that they engage in independently in their daily lives. Whilst the discussion relates to my own research which was carried out with children, the issues arising from both the methods and the visual results is not restricted to this context. The article does not stand as a defence of playful child-centred research techniques, which I see as in no need of justification, but rather demonstrates, through the example of my fieldwork, the type of information that such techniques can generate in a variety of forms, whether research is with children or adults. These act as a concrete example both of the positive impact of such techniques on the data collected, but also of the tension between verbal and visual forms of expression.

## **Research context**

I undertook research between November 2001 and September 2003, funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the ESRC. My research was with refugee children from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), housed in Kala refugee camp in Northern Zambia. (I use the refugees' own definition of 'child', which encompasses over-18 year olds who are unmarried or still in school.) I was specifically interested in the impact of material changes on identity and 'culture', and the ways in which these would be affected and altered when children's living conditions changed as necessitated by flight and temporary refuge in a refugee camp. One aim of the research was to challenge sensationalist media images and the strategic portrayal of children as helpless and in need, and instead to gain an idea of life in the camp from the children's point of view, and to focus on the changes that they experienced as most significant or problematic.

The social context of the refugee camp had a significant impact on the research, including the way it affected children's lives and the restrictions imposed on me by the camp administration. As a result, participation in children's everyday lives—already inherently difficult for an adult—was made even more problematic, and my research was primarily carried out in structured activities similar to focus groups with specific groups of children of different ages and levels of education, who had spent different lengths of time in the refugee camp. My interactions with each of these groups continued over a period of several months.

Moreover, there are certain particularities involved in carrying out research with children that make themselves known in most contexts. These include power imbalances and the problem of being associated with other adults, such as parents and

teachers, by children who react towards the researcher accordingly. These aspects of the adult-child relationship can have an impact on communication, and in addition children may have different competencies with regards to verbal communication, or may communicate in other ways. Furthermore, children are not a homogenous group and there are differences of gender, education and social background.

Doing research with children, a ‘muted group’ (Ardener’s phrase, applied to children by Ennew 1998:xviii), entails using forms of communication that do not ‘silence’ them, or put them at a disadvantage. In researching children, the success of the methodology lies in both its effectiveness in obtaining information, and the success of communicating children’s meanings. Play is effective in both opening channels of communication and obtaining information. I will give examples of this in the section immediately below. Play does, however provoke the later challenge of communicating this information in such a way that it loses neither its meaning nor its vibrancy—a challenge that I will discuss further in the section further below entitled ‘Images and words’.

### The meaning of play

Play during research, although productive, is generally something that researchers choose to do for recreation, and thus separated from *fieldwork*. Although play as a part of fieldwork is increasingly valued and recognised as a means of learning, researchers in general do not use play instrumentally in this way. The use of play as a specific tool is most often limited to research with children. Different attitudes towards the use of play in research therefore present parallels to the treatment of play in academic discussions. In academic work, play is often constructed as having three elements, exceeding the recreational to encompass the educational and the social.

The playful research activities discussed here are distinct from children’s everyday play activities and therefore children’s relationships to them may be different. Looking at the meaning and value of play activities in everyday life as opposed to in academia is nonetheless instructive in understanding the potential meaning and value of playful methodology. Academic treatments often ignore the recreational and reduce children’s play to an educational activity, although this can encompass learning to be social (Smith 2000:78). One particular example of this is in the conflation of play and work for children (e.g. ‘play is for children what work is for adults’, *ibid*:80). Whilst recognising the importance of play, such discussions ignore children’s own interpretations of play’s worth, which prioritise other elements such as the recreational aspect or the opportunity for autonomy.

Likewise in research, play is not only important in terms of information gained, but also in creating and maintaining relationships. As with all *participant* observation, what we gain through play is participation in different aspects of people’s lives; enabling better understanding and better research by building different relationships. In this way participating in people’s recreational activities is no different from following them in their working lives as part of research. However, the division between work and play is not straightforward. If it is enjoyable, can it be work? If it is productive, can it be play? It may be more relevant to talk of motivations, such as my own motivation for using play (for *fieldwork*), or the children’s motivation for attending discussion groups (for recreation). When children and researchers play for recreational purposes, they simultaneously build relationships and learn; equally,

when the motivation is learning, this is done in a fun and social way. To try to separate these aspects is to change the nature of the activity.

The question of whether or not an activity is 'play' is particularly pertinent to my fieldwork, as I was mostly introducing play-like activities as tools explicitly designed to elicit specific types of information, rather than joining in with existing play activities. Many of the activities that I carried out were based on child-centred research techniques (cf. Johnson *et al* 1998—such activities often resemble Participatory Rural Appraisal or PRA-type exercises); they are not therefore the usual play activities of children in Kala. The 'play' or recreational aspect of drawing, for example, may have come precisely from the fact that it was something that the children rarely, if ever, had an opportunity to do otherwise. These activities produced very different kinds of information from my observation and (limited) participation in children's usual play activities (for more on this type of research see e.g. Goldman 1998).

### **Methods: examples of play**

Following training in research with children and anthropological methodology, my methods were an eclectic mixture combining ethnographic approaches involving interviews and participant observation with a variety of child-centred research techniques including traditional PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) methods, such as matrices and mapping, and those more specifically designed for use with children, such as games, photography, song, artwork, videoing, role play and recording interviews with each other. The aim of using such a wide range of methods was to encourage maximum involvement and inclusion of children with a wide range in terms of age, capacity and skills. Furthermore, several of the activities had an open-ended focus in order to encourage children to express themselves in different ways. More importantly the methods were designed to be fun.

The open-ended topics and playful nature of the methods were designed to create an environment that allowed children to talk freely and to introduce their own topics. This was especially useful in a context where the time that could be spent building relationships of trust was limited. In addition I considered it important because, as Ennew notes, 'Muted groups...are [often] unable to express their reality in ways that are acceptable to the dominant groups that control both means and modes of expression' (1998:xviii). Whilst I implemented playful activities as research tools, I simultaneously used them to create affinity, to relax the children and to form relationships. The success of these depended heavily on the previous experiences of the children and I therefore used the tools with great flexibility.

Playful activities in themselves do not automatically produce information that can be productively used for analysis. The most valuable information is produced through the interactions between the researcher and the 'subjects'; play's usefulness often lies in the way it facilitates this interaction. For example, I held a drawing competition that resulted in over 5,000 drawings produced in schools and therefore in detachment from me. The analysis of these drawings was only meaningful against the backdrop of my interactions over time with children in the camp. Taken out of that context these drawings would, for example, have led to an overemphasis on trauma and war experiences, a concern that was not of primary importance to the children, although it appeared this way from some of the competition drawings (I have addressed this issue

further in Atkinson 2005). It was my playful discussions with children that gave me the knowledge to judge the significant aspects of the drawings. Furthermore, although these pictures stand alone more easily than others produced in my fieldwork, there are many things that they do not express as effectively as other activities, such as timelines and mapping exercises.



Fig 1. Mapping exercise: plan of a house/plot. Some explanations: (1) dish rack, (11 top) hoe, (14) mortar for pounding grain, (16) toilet.



Fig 2. Timeline: a day in the camp. (1) Wake up, get dressed, (2) sweep, (3) cook breakfast, wash the dishes, fetch water...

Working in small groups, most of my methods involved activities paired with, or followed by discussions, with children explaining and discussing the activity or drawing. Although it was time consuming, the children enjoyed drawing and this was effective in forming a basis for discussion, which I recorded by taking notes.

There are many factors that affect the effectiveness and usage of play as a tool, for example the ability of the child and their preferences and experience. As the category 'child' is so broad, different methods were more or less relevant or appropriate for different groups, and therefore the way the results could be used in my final report were also different. Some things that could be taken for granted in a Western context, where children have relatively standardised levels of schooling, age and ability, were more problematic in the African context as age, for example, could not be relied on to determine relevant research activities.

Differences in ability can lead to situations that cause a decrease in self-esteem rather than the empowerment that such methods are generally considered to promote. In one group of 12 children aged 12-16, there was only one child, Kisimba (15), who had never been to school. She could not write her own name and the pictures and symbols she was able to draw were not always recognisable. This was not a problem for my research as we discussed the pictures, but sometimes the other children would make disparaging remarks. At times, then, the group environment and the use of drawings, which were both intended to make the experience more comfortable and fun, worked against those objectives.

On the other hand I provided children with a means with which to express their knowledge, and I demonstrated to them and others that this information could be valued. One group of children explained a map they had drawn of an area of the camp which they considered to be important (the first activity that we did together), and my interpreter was frowning and said in a doubtful voice, 'They were saying that this is the building where they hold the section leaders meetings'. When I confirmed that the children were right, he was amazed that they knew something that he did not.

Another of my early activities was to ask the children to draw the most important person in their life, and at the end of an hour I had drawings of houses, a river, flowers, and so on, but from a group of 12 children only one had drawn a person. After much thought, I decided that a likely reason was that it is difficult to draw people. I therefore returned the following day armed with tools and tactics. I provided templates of people to trace but asked the children to first discuss in pairs the person that they would draw and why they were important in their lives. This time I got many drawings of people, but the children were more excited about the pictures I had provided and about making a faithful copy of these, than in drawing people important to them. In this sense the play aspect of my methods 'obstructed' the 'fieldwork', but the drawings nonetheless generated information, simply not on the intended topic.

I also filmed a documentary—directed by a group of children—of children's activities in the camp which included work, play and school activities. This method used the filming as part of the process of research, but I also used video as a means of recording children's physical and playful expression of experiences, such as when my discussion groups did drama sketches of 'fleeing Congo'. Both of these activities gave me rich results in terms of information. The former, for example, confirmed and illustrated the ways in which children in the camp had a strong sense of duty in terms of the chores they had to perform, and it further demonstrated the way that such activities contributed to children's status. To briefly illustrate this, let me quote from the sub-titles of the children's commentary and voice-over on the documentary that they directed:

They have seen that as life here is difficult, they saw that they could also make the effort to get a bit of money. They are pupils; they do not have

clothes... They are going to work so that they can buy clothes...when they have money they will give some of it to their parents to buy small-fry and things like that.

There is a contribution before enrolment [at school] ...the straw, the sticks and the cord are for this building here. They are trying to add other classrooms as so many more pupils come each year. The other buildings are wooden but this time they added a brick building; All this from the labours of the pupils.

In the process of carrying out the filming I also learnt, through the attitudes and comments of those 'directing', how seriously the young people took their image, ability to earn money and education. Even the fact that a gender balanced group was reduced to having only one girl, who was rarely able to join us due to family commitments, was informative.

I learnt about children's experiences during the war and in transit to the camp through drama sketches they devised and performed. I had been reluctant to evoke negative memories by introducing this topic for individual discussion, but this activity was designed as speculative and derived from the experiences of the group rather than of any individual child. I learnt of the ways soldiers harassed villagers, the way people responded to the threat prior to flight, and about details such as the identity tags they all had to wear on registering with UNHCR. More importantly, however, I learnt how much fun the boys found it to play 'war'. I say 'more importantly' because this gave me information with which to question or evaluate the proliferation of war images in drawings from the competition discussed above (which contradicted their absence from other activities), and to view them as an indication of something other than trauma; in short to access children's points of view regarding the war.

The use of theatre is elsewhere discussed as a research technique that is additionally therapeutic and a means for children's communication (Cloma 1998:106, Hart 1997:189). The above sketches may have been therapeutic, but I got the impression that mostly it was fun! 'Comic' scenes where a bus kangaroos and jolts along the road were played for the children's own enjoyment (my interpreter and I were the only observers), and the boys managed to drag out the 'war' scenes longer and longer each time we went through them, creating dust and havoc.

The types of methods I used were intended to reduce the power imbalance inherent in adult-child interaction (cf. how feminist methodologies address this problem by using characteristics of the researcher such as their gender, e.g. Abu-Lughod 1999), but I remained a white adult and the children were inescapably refugee children dependent on aid provided by the West. What the playful methods achieved was not the disappearance of these categories, but the rapprochement of our positions as individuals who were known to one another. This point connects directly to an underlying aim of all ethnographic methods, whether the research involves children or adults. Since information is generated and transmitted through relationships between the researcher and the informants, methods that assist in building relationships facilitate the research process, and in doing so I would argue that they soften the impact of the power dynamics often inherent in research interactions. As a result I consider such methods to be more ethical and frequently more effective.

Although my motivation for using drawing was to move communication away from adult-controlled verbal arenas, much of the information still came from discussions, but these were generated by the drawings. Information, although given verbally, was

accessed through the drawings, which acted as an entry point for me to access children's worlds and for children to access the topic under discussion. It is precisely the combination of discussion and activity (and of different activities) that I think worked so well in producing information and in making the children feel comfortable and able to enjoy themselves in the process.

There is not sufficient scope in this article to evaluate and discuss the integration of all the methods that I used, and the remainder of my discussion therefore focuses on drawings of various types (portraits, maps, timelines), as these were the activities that formed the majority of my research. The question of how to deal with the outcomes of these, which were mostly visual, is the focus of the following section.

### Images and words: translating the visual

The above discussion has so far focused on the practice of using play as an aspect of methodology; however there remains the issue of how to manage information generated using such methods. The way data is analysed and interpreted is of equal importance to the context or atmosphere in which it is collected.

In academia the written and the verbal are often prioritised and valued above other forms of expression. Whilst in anthropology there has been a tradition of including photographs within written accounts, these are generally for illustrative purposes. Previously they may even have been part of the objectification and exoticisation of the people being represented. More recently, especially with more convenient technology, there has been an increase in visual anthropology. New ways of putting technology in the hands of the informants are also emerging. The examples of my work that I have given here, however, raise questions regarding the way in which visual results of ethnographic research are presented. I would argue that when it comes to the most common form in which visual results are currently found, namely photographs, the issue is not simply that they are not used to their full potential by the author, but that the reader does not know how to 'read' them. In my experience, the result is that even when the author is using them to present something that cannot be rendered with words, the visual outputs may be read as decoration or relief from the text.

In addition to the challenge of using images to their full potential, in my research there is the added responsibility of accurately communicating what the children were saying. If children use different forms of communication than adults (Christensen and James 2000:7, Davis 1998:327), can the adult interpreting their information correctly understand and accurately render it to others? It is important that children's meanings are not lost in the analysis or interpretation. I have therefore included many examples of the *visual* results of my research within my *written* analyses of it; these images are 'direct quotes' from children. I have also used verbal quotes within the text, but these are only the skeleton of the ways in which children expressed themselves to me. Both types of quotes serve to remind the reader that the children's 'voices' are as important as my analysis. The use of visual methodologies was therefore important in overcoming the problems identified both in the research stage and subsequently in the presentation and analysis, but in the latter stage their usage was a challenge to both my skill in presenting them and the openness of the academic world in receiving them.

From the drawing competition it became clear that although some drawings could stand alone in expressing ideas (Fig 3), in others background knowledge was

necessary to recognise the relevance; for someone unfamiliar with the context, meanings might be missed (Fig 4). For yet other drawings it was only the children's words that accompanied them that completed the expression of ideas (Fig 5).

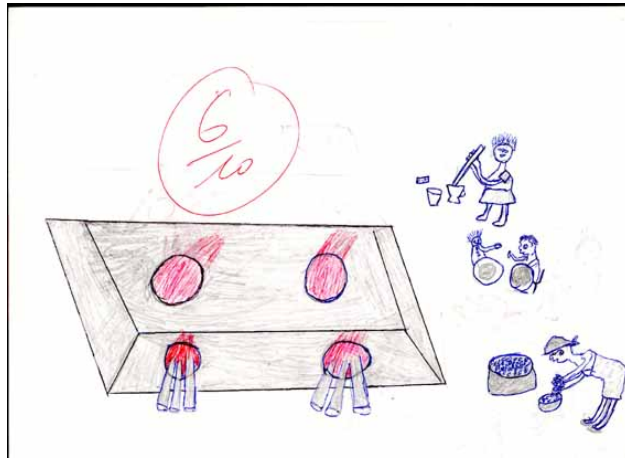


Fig 3. A fuel efficient stove built as part of the environmental programmes in the camp. In my thesis this drawing was used as a 'direct quote', the significance being the choice of subject given that the children had been asked to draw a picture of life in the camp. (The drawing competition was done through the schools and therefore the drawings were 'marked' by the teachers for composition etc. Prizes were not awarded on this basis and neither did it have any impact on my interaction with the pictures, but this stands as a further example of the way that 'play's' value is often seen to be in its educational capacity.)

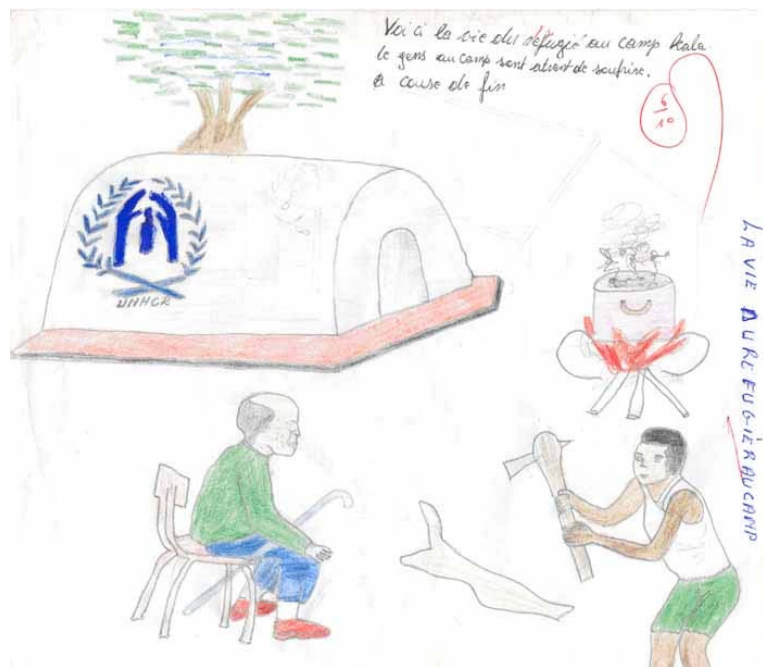


Fig 4. The caption reads: 'This is the life of refugees in Kala camp. People are suffering from hunger.' But these types of tent houses are only used until a permanent house is built and the drawing is therefore misleading without some knowledge of the context.



Fig 5. The caption reads: 'On the distribution days this is what people do. Those without money exchange mealie meal [finely ground maize] for smallfry, cassava, oil and so on.' In my thesis this image was used as an example of the recurring topic of conversation introduced by children, 'food' and especially receiving food. This is also a demonstration of the economic importance of food, the activities associated with it in the refugee camp and the impact of international organisations on children's lives.

One source of the challenge in presenting the images drawn by the children comes from the 'important ways that the post-creation social life of objects impacts on both form and signification' (Blier 2005:95). The way I will use the pictures in my written discussion is different from the way they were used in the oral discussion for which they were originally drawn. The pictures, and thus the 'draughtsmen and women' through the part of themselves that they put into the images, therefore continue to affect both me and my discussion due to the agency of these images (Gell 1998:13-27; cf. Gell's discussion which treats art objects—in the same way that Mauss does a gift—as persons or social agents, Gell 1998:9).

When I present a drawing by the children in my writing, is it necessary that I indicate each time the aspects I consider relevant, and the levels of meaning I see portrayed? To do so may seem to defeat the purpose of using the image, given that such description would be duplication; yet if I include only a written description of the image, the reader no longer experiences the child's voice first-hand. (In my doctoral thesis I have had to do this with the video as I have yet to resolve how to integrate this into the written text. It seems that using electronic versions may be the only means by which they can be combined.) Anthropology as a discipline generally accepts that

analysis should involve quotes such that people express themselves ‘in their own words’, but expressing themselves ‘in their own images’ such as those included above is not considered a standard part of this.

Whilst writing my thesis I came up against several decisions regarding not only which images to present but also the way in which to do so. The pictures that the children had drawn as part of a discussion were explained to the reader, as they had been explained to me, but others were inserted into the writing to stand alone. Some were illustrations, others demonstrations. Some were ‘quotes’ from the children, others an attempt by myself to counterbalance media representations. Some ideas, such as overlaying images with words to combine the two, remain potential solutions that I did not put into practice. These decisions were also influenced by practical considerations such as the cost of printing.

In terms of images to be presented in the final written account, I found drawings from the competition especially ‘quotable’. This is due both to the written explanations that accompany them and to the quality of some of the drawings. There is little difference between using images in this way, and what is often done with words. A quote from a particularly eloquent speaker or a clearly recorded conversation may be used to articulate information absorbed gradually through experience or from a combination of sources. (This is one of the strengths of carrying out long-term ethnographic fieldwork and/or participant observation; the researcher can *know* more than what they are directly *told*.)

The inclusion of so many visual images in my writing might lead to its categorisation as ‘visual anthropology’, but it is important to make a distinction. The children’s photographs and drawings are more like tapes or transcripts of interviews, and field-notes, than the visual anthropologist’s photographs and films. Whilst all products of fieldwork are the result of interactions between the researcher and the informants, the two types of images appear at different stages on the continuum of producer-process-product (Fabian, cited in Crawford 1992:68), or perhaps more tellingly, the anthropologist is located differently for each of these images in the artist-index-recipient schema (Gell 1998:13-27). I would argue that visual anthropologists, as a result of the process of fieldwork, have a product of their own creation resulting from their interaction with informants, whereas I have a product which is created by the informants as part of their interaction with me. The same process of interaction and negotiation has taken place, but in my case the children had control of the image that was produced—they were holding the camera (and directing it in the case of the video), or the pencil. An image is produced in both cases, but the ethnographer’s relationship to the ‘artefact’ is different. I would therefore argue that the work that is left to do before presenting the information to an audience, and the time and process of analysis, are also different.

Likewise, although the images are created by the refugees, this is not the same as the study of material culture, as they were produced specifically as part of the research interaction; I shaped the thematic content and determined the form. In spite of these key differences, however, there are important contributions that these fields can make to both the recognition of the importance of visuals, and to the ways in which they can be included in a written discussion.

A relevant question here is whether play—in terms of drawings, filming and theatre—is just a way of getting better words, or whether it is also something different, something *more*? Certainly words are an important part of communication and I too

am often seduced by the ease with which they can communicate to the reader. I find myself quoting from the subtitles of the documentary film in my thesis and searching for pictures where the children had written captions. This is not problematic; children should not be denied access to the verbal arena simply because it is seen as an 'adult' domain. But what my research did was to offer them alternatives. Additionally, the written and recorded verbal remarks are generally produced by older children; it is therefore important to include expressions of younger children's points of view by including (even badly drawn) pictures and the oral explanations of these pictures that they gave me.

Using words may be the convention in anthropological presentation, and certainly it is easier to integrate verbal quotes into a written analysis, but I maintain that some information gained from the visual cannot be gleaned or projected through written words, not least because pictures are also performative and phenomenologically produced, and therefore involve experience as well as reflect it. Whilst a speech act could also be considered in this light, the process of producing or creating a drawing that has something tangible at the end can be a powerful experience, especially for children. This is heightened by the fact that the end result is something that can be altered, added to, changed and adapted until it is parted with, in a way that words, once spoken, cannot be. By using 'visual quotes' it may be possible to convey more of experience that produced them in addition to the experience they speak of.

## Learning to 'read' images

My argument in this article does not constitute a challenge to writing's status as the most effective tool for analysis and argument; what I wish to do differently in my work lies in the balance and way of combining words and images. The images do not merely illustrate (as they are often used in anthropological texts), but demonstrate (in the same way that verbal quotes do).

The issue of levels of analysis arises out of this situation. A presentation of images alone could be considered simply raw data, but anthropologists' work increasingly involves raw data in the form of descriptive anecdotes or whole passages in the informants' 'own words' in order to substantiate a point or to make the text more evocative. In my case I similarly include photographs and drawings as a form of quotation.

Another issue that becomes pertinent here relates to the perceived and actual audiences that I am 'speaking' to. Translation of experience is a constant process for anthropologists and is done in a variety of ways, as film, novel or scientific treatise, but the manner of presenting information is often affected by the audience or consumer. Representations are done differently in different contexts determined by what is acceptable and accessible to the audience. Reader feedback will therefore be central to evaluating the merits of and challenges arising from the use of imagery in my work. Even when the purpose and message of an image are clear to the writer, they may not be to a reader. I would argue that it will be necessary in the field of social anthropology to build up, over time, a shared understanding of the levels of meaning in images and how these can be 'read', in the same way that we share understandings of how to read graphs and tables. The issue is not that there is a lack of images currently used in anthropology, but rather that they are not used to their full potential by either 'reader' or 'writer'.

To give just one example, I recently presented a paper discussing the topic of children's activities, and then showed part of a documentary shot with the children on the same topic. The response from one listener/viewer was that the video had not shown anything new; that the paper had covered it all. Although it would be flattering to think that this comment reflected on the rich communicative nature of my words, I am more inclined to see it as an indication that, as a discipline and in academia in general, we are not trained to appreciate non-verbal forms of communicating analysis. (For more in-depth discussion on the marginalisation of the visual, see works in visual anthropology such as Grimshaw 2005 and Morphy and Banks 1997.)

When we see an image we may not be experienced enough in seeing the levels of meaning present in this different register, and therefore we may assume that greater density and layers of meaning are available in a text (cf. the anthropologist's role in Geertz's (1973) explication of 'thick description', which only applies to their use of words to represent). The irony is that in the field anthropologists are observers: traditionally we *observe* rather than *read* the world we are participating in. Our interest is not just in what people say, but in what they do; their thoughts and behaviour as well as their words. Although at the end of each day we are likely to convert our observations and experiences into words, we nonetheless, at this stage in the research process, value what is seen and experienced.

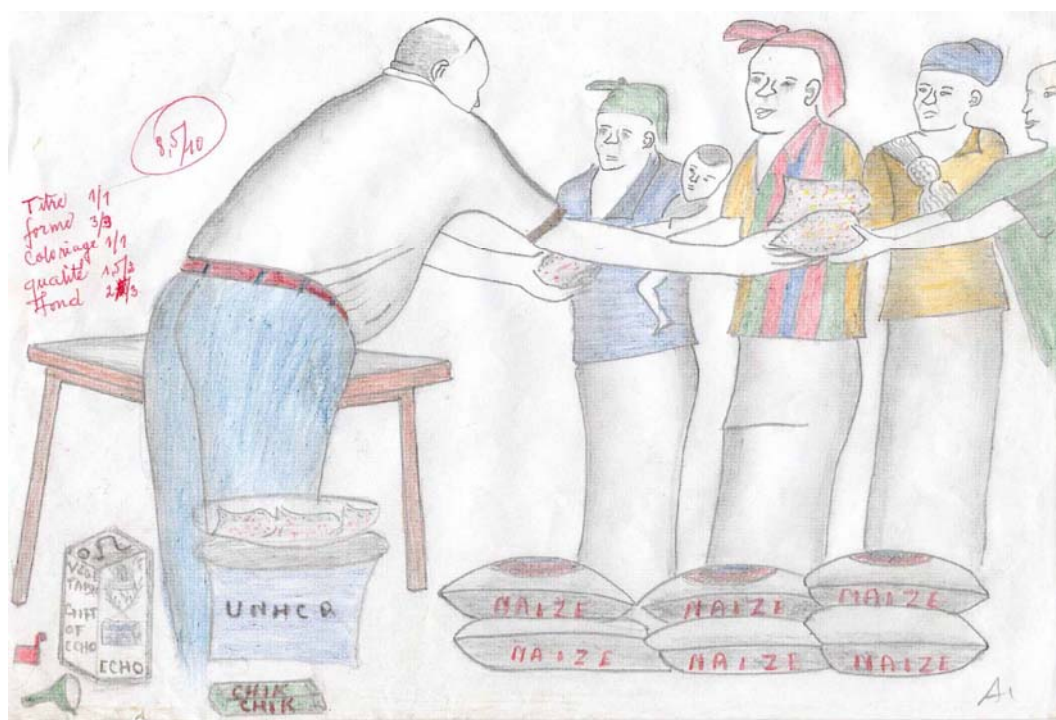


Fig 6. The following are notes on some of the levels of meaning that can be read into this picture, based on children's comments and my own experiences in the camp:

- This is a picture of people receiving food.
- The food is from the UN.
- The name of whoever donated the oil is generally printed on the tin.
- The food is carefully measured (the red cup is for measuring oil).
- The man giving the food is dressed in Western-style clothes, this is a reflection of the fact that women are more likely to wear traditional clothing than men, that Zambians are more likely to wear Western-style clothes than the Congolese, and that refugees cannot afford to buy Western-style clothes (furthermore *salaula* second hand clothes do not generally contain jeans).

- The women are wearing scarves. The refugees are less likely to have braids or extensions, especially older women.



Fig 7. This picture shows many of the things that are different in the camp, but it especially demonstrates children's fascination with the 'exotic' in the focus on the lorries and the inclusion of the 'Motorola' radios.

In many ways the challenge I face is no different from that frequently experienced in all areas of anthropology: how to interpret others' and our own experience such that it can be rendered meaningful to colleagues and open to analysis. I simply go beyond 'the assumption that translation is essentially a matter of verbal representation' (Asad 1986:160), and include other media in my discussions.

### Concluding comments

Although my own work was with children, the use of more playful techniques need not be restricted to that group. There are many ways in which such techniques can contribute to fieldwork—in the building of relationships, the different kinds of interactions that produce different kinds of information, and of course the 'Rest and Recuperation' that is a necessary part of fieldwork.

The value of playful methods is that they access information that may not be easily expressed verbally. This is particularly useful when doing research with children. The methods are also helpful in more indirect facilitation of expression, as playful interactions are a useful way for people to enter into each other's social worlds. The challenge is that the information resulting from such interactions, although involving words, is not necessarily expressed or recorded in a medium that is easily integrated into written analysis.

Whilst such visual expressions do not map onto established means of dealing with images in either visual or material anthropology, the existence of these sub-disciplines is a clear indication that a reification of the verbal may be neither necessary nor desirable. These fields, along with other disciplines, may provide some assistance in processing and expressing visual information. My experience, however, suggests that the most necessary step will be to educate us as 'consumers' of such expressions to accept them and read them with as much skill as we read layers of meaning in textual expressions. This is a project that has already been started by visual anthropologists such as Grimshaw (2005).

The fact that anthropologists are all skilled at 'observing' and finding the necessary relevance in material encountered in the field is an indication that we are capable of 'reading' analytical discussions that combine the verbal with the visual. What I hope I have done in this article is to remind us that within current debates over representation in anthropology, it is necessary to also discuss non-verbal means of representation.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, L. 1999. *Veiled Sentiments: Honour and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Asad, T. 1986. The concept of cultural translation. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (eds) J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Atkinson, L. 2005. Out of the shadows and into the spotlight: issues of importance to refugee children in Zambia. Paper presented at the conference *Children and War*, Rutgers University, 7-9 April.
- Blier, S.P. 2005. Transcending places: a hybrid, multiplex approach to visual culture. In *Anthropologies of Art* (ed.) M. Westermann. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Christensen, P. and A. James (eds). 2000. *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practice*. London: Falmer.
- Cloma, E. 1998. The children's theatre collective of the Philippine Educational Theatre Association. In *Stepping Forward: Children and Young People's Participation in the Development Process* (eds) V. Johnson, E. Ivan-Smith, G. Gordon, P. Pridmore and P. Scott. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Crawford, P.I. 1992. Film as discourse: the invention of anthropological realities. In *Film as Ethnography* (eds) P.I. Crawford and D. Turton. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Davis, J.M. 1998. Understanding the meanings of children: a reflexive process. *Children and Society* **12**, 325-335.
- Ennew, J. 1998. Preface. In *Stepping Forward: Children and Young People's Participation in the Development Process* (eds) V. Johnson, E. Ivan-Smith, G. Gordon, P. Pridmore and P. Scott. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

- Gell, A. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, L.R. 1998. *Child's Play: Myth, Mimesis and Make-Believe*. Oxford: Berg.
- Grimshaw, A. 2005. Reconfiguring the ground: art and the visualization of anthropology. In *Anthropologies of Art* (ed.) M. Westermann. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hart, R. 1997. *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*. London: Earthscan.
- Johnson, V., E. Ivan-Smith, G. Gordon, P. Pridmore and P. Scott (eds). 1998. *Stepping Forward: Children and Young People's Participation in the Development Process*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Morphy, H. and M. Banks. 1997. *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, S. 2000. Children at play. In *Childhood Studies: A Reader in Perspectives of Childhood* (eds) J. Mills and R. Mills. London and New York: Routledge.

### About the author

Lucy Atkinson studied Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. Her undergraduate research was on children and the juvenile justice system in Lesotho. She is currently working on her PhD, also at the University of Edinburgh. Her thesis, entitled 'Living, Eating and Learning: Children's Experiences of Change and Life in a Refugee Camp', is based on fieldwork with children in a refugee camp in Zambia. Her particular interests include food, visual anthropology, the anthropology of childhood and the anthropology of the everyday.