
Working Images

Visual Research and Representation
in Ethnography

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New graphics for old stories

Representation of local memories through drawings

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Words and drawings

This paper reflects on the possibilities of articulating drawing with text, as an expressive joint form of representation in anthropology – a topic that has been viewed unevenly by different national anthropological traditions.

There is a long-term tradition of anthropologists working with artists to produce museum displays, as emphasised by (amongst others) Bouquet (2001) and Price (1989). However empirical case-studies that directly address the possibilities of using drawings in anthropological research are rare, both in regard to the nature of drawings themselves (i.e. as acts and products), and in the way they may be combined with text. Rather, recent publications under the general theme of visual anthropology (Grimshaw 2001; Ruby 2000; El Guindi 1998; Banks and Morphy 1997) have been largely concentrated either on film or on photography, as privileged forms of visual representation.

Nevertheless, some exceptions to this trend can be found, which, albeit scarce, represent the potential of the use of drawings and paintings to elicit and analyse anthropological data. A good example is the work of Hildred Geertz (1994) based on the Balinese paintings and sketches that Mead and Bateson intuitively requested and collected from local peasants during their stay in Bali (1936–8). It is interesting to note that although this was intended as a study of the painters of one of the villages where Mead and Bateson conducted fieldwork, during the process of acquiring the pictures important data on local life and culture was also produced:

Bateson and a Balinese assistant, I Madé Kalér, made over two hundred pages of notes on the pictures bought, recording each painter's comments and stories in his own words. In addition, Mead and Bateson designed a lengthy questionnaire that was used by Kalér to interview twenty-three of the main artists. They asked about their economic life, education, experience with foreigners, how they learned to make pictures, and how they usually marketed them.

(Geertz 1994: 121)

More recent anthropological studies by Prinz (2001) and Stewart (1990) show a similar attraction for native drawings, namely children's drawings, collected or analysed in the course of fieldwork to supplement verbal information on different cultural domains. In other cases, drawings have been commissioned from reputed artists and used in educational projects for their aesthetic appeal in combination with texts, in order to communicate a message – for example in a campaign against hunger, promoted by the *Comité français pour la solidarité internationale* (Cothias *et al.* 2000). There are also exceptional situations where the anthropologist is especially talented and combines his artistic skills with ethnographic writing. For example, in his work on New Guinea, Nicolas Garnier (2000) adopts a travel diary style, vividly supported with his watercolours and ink-pen drawings. Stanford Carpenter's cartoon strips on Africa and Deena Newman's (1998) attempt to present the central part of her article on 'Ethnographic Rumors in Addis Ababa' in the peculiar form of a story conveyed through sequences of images and words, are further examples of this innovative medium of anthropological expression.

Another illuminating approach to the use of paintings and drawings in anthropological research was the retrospective exhibition (1975–2001) held at the Völkerkunde Museum of Zurich about the work of the Australian artist and architect Robert Powell, who lived and worked in the Himalayas for many years. The edited catalogue – *Robert Powell Himalayan Drawings* (Oppitz 2001) – offers an excellent examination of Powell's work, which include watercolours, ink and pencil drawings documenting different forms of vernacular architecture and different local customs and beliefs as reflected in material objects (Oppitz 2001: 7). The contributors to the volume, ranging from specialists in art and architecture to social anthropology and ethnography, have collaborated with the artist and discuss the potential of this form of visual documentation in anthropological research, either on its own or in conjunction with other visual media, providing stimulating insights in the domain of visual anthropology.

As regards smaller and peripheral countries like Portugal, where outside intellectual influence has traditionally been more or less bipolar (Anglo-Saxon versus Franco-German), 'graphic anthropology' – a special branch of visual anthropology – is still in its infancy (despite the promise this kind of illustration holds) since the first modern anthropological works (e.g. Dias 1953; Redinha 1956). The use of ethnographic drawing in Portuguese anthropology is linked to the historical figure of Fernando Galhano, a talented artist who integrated a pioneering mixed team of anthropologists, historians, musicologists, artists, archivists and photographers, led by the anthropologist Jorge Dias – the founder of the first ethnological research centre in Portugal (*Centro de Estudos de Etnologia Peninsular*). This centre was created in Oporto in 1947. From its inception to its later integration in the Museu Nacional de Etnologia (Lisbon) in the mid-1960s, the staff developed extensive fieldwork projects on material cultural, ranging from different traditional technologies to vernacular architecture, musical instruments, agricultural activities and agricultural implements (Veiga de Oliveira

et al. 1977). This programme was based on the concept of 'urgent anthropology', which aimed at covering the country's popular culture and traditions, deemed at risk of disappearing under conditions of rapid social change. The project gave rise to a profusion of ethnographic records on different supports (audio, film, photography) and also to a vast collection of drawings authored by Fernando Galhano, whose activity was linked to the museum's projects and collections until the 1970s (Dias and Galhano 1968; Galhano 1968, 1971, 1973). A selection of his drawings was exhibited at the Museu Nacional de Etnologia and the published catalogues attest to the profusion and quality of his work (Cinatti 1987; Museu de Etnologia 1985).

Galhano's line of graphic documentation was carried through by Manuela Costa, previously a restoration technician at the Museum, who was taught and trained by Fernando Galhano, and later participated in collaborative works (Pereira 1990, 1997). Unfortunately, after her sudden retirement in 2001, the museum ceased to promote the art of ethnographic drawing, and indeed that of museographic photography, and instead turned to film/video as the dominant form of ethnographic representation. The same trend accompanied the expansion of undergraduate anthropology across Portuguese universities after the 1974 Revolution. To a certain extent, this has helped increase a generational gap between an old ethnographic-folkloristic discourse and a newer, more academically oriented, anthropological discourse. Common to both trends has been the same gusto for importing fashionable research models and adding very little home-grown reflection. After the Revolution, new orientations in teaching and research were adopted and extensively replicated, reflecting a rapid assimilation of fashionable paradigms and methodologies and a rather uncritical rejection of previous ones.

With regard to the inclusion of graphic elements in anthropological texts as a result of the use of drawing as a research method, the situation can be summarised as follows. A decline in the preference for scientific drawing in different domains (biology, archaeology, ethnology, vernacular architecture) was evident from the mid-1970s, when universities and research institutes underwent overall restructuring. Modernisation was seen as a rupture with the past and blind renewal seemed to have dominated the scientific world. During the 1990s a new generation of Portuguese anthropologists enthusiastically sought to pursue projects in Visual Anthropology. Photography and film became the privileged media, and drawing as an accepted or valued element of representation was clearly pushed aside as a 'handicrafty' and unfashionable device. In fact, published works appearing during last decade rarely integrate ethnographic drawing and most debates on the use of visual media in Portuguese anthropology focus exclusively on the uses of the video camera.

Recently, Manuel João Ramos (see Chapter 9 this book), who combines anthropological research and an artistic career, has been trying to rehabilitate the old tradition of ethnographic drawing, while visibly looking to the genres of comic strips and travel illustration as inspiration for his graphic approach to data

collecting and presentation. In his illustrated travel-ethnographic account of his stay in Northern Ethiopia (Ramos 2000), images intertwine with field notes in a matter-of-fact way, enabling the reader-viewer to create the imaginary context upon which he is able to situate and interpret the series of transcripts of oral histories, that indicate the presence of the 'natives' voice'.

An aspect he underlines in the introduction of his book is that his drawings are a catalyst for observation, a path to reflexivity and a key to promote social interaction with local informants:

When I travel alone, I cherish the feeling that time can be joyfully wasted. The act of drawing is a self-referential form of spending time. On the other hand, making drawings is a rather benign way of observing social behaviour: both local people and fellow travellers tend to react to my drawings in mixed ways where curiosity, availability and suspicion overlap. By drawing I provoke modes of interaction that humanise me in other people's eyes.
(Ramos 2000: 9, my translation)

I have worked in collaboration with Manuel João Ramos in an experimental project where his graphic work was used to elicit information in the area of social change. He started by making a series of ink pen drawings, in a style that was rather different from his usual drawings. He intentionally chose a 'realistic' trait, an obvious pastiche of earlier ethnographic drawings, which was clearly recognised as such by the informants.

Below, I will refer to the conditions and results of this project, and will try to emphasise its potential as a collaborative device. This collaborative dimension is to be regarded in two ways – as a result of interaction with informants and also as a teamwork process conducted with the artist, who made the drawings that rendered possible this approach. Although I have the responsibility for this written version of our work, it is strongly anchored on complementary tasks and conspicuous conversations that gave rise to the reflections here presented.

From illustration to elicitation

When I was revising the first drafts of my Ph.D. thesis on urbanisation in a rural village of north-eastern Portugal, I asked Manuel João Ramos to make some drawings to illustrate particular features of old objects and past activities in the village that were lacking visual documentation. My first demands were quite specific – I commissioned him to draw from old photographs I had borrowed from family albums or to incorporate additional information into official village maps, to give an idea of the village's spatial dynamics.

With hindsight, what attracted me most was undoubtedly the aesthetic power of ethnographic drawings vis-à-vis other forms of visual representation (such as 'bad' photographs or official maps). In other words, I was aware of its *illustrative* richness. But when I confronted informants with the first sketches and tried to

depict the ethnographic details that Manuel João required to make his meticulous ink pen drawings, we felt that this simple process was going beyond mere illustration.

In fact, when the first sketches, based on my early field notes, were presented to the informants, as a first proposal of iconographic interpretation of their own discourses, we could see that through this simple confrontation it was possible not only to annotate several comments about the contents of this type of representation but also to promote new arrangements, more detailed, of the informants' memories.

Given the profusion of ethnographic details that emerged from such simple confrontation of the informants with the first sketches, we tried to extend the enquiry in a systematic way. After analysing the registered comments, new drawings were made. These incorporated the successive annotations, corrections and interpretations added by the different informants to the sketches.

The execution of the drawings soon made clear that the overall process could be used as a powerful methodological tool in anthropological research. Thus, in a very straightforward way, it allowed us to deepen informants' involvement (as sources, checkers and authenticators) and also served as a probe to trigger and explore their social memories, transcending the limits of lineal textual representation.

Although this approach requires further testing, two brief examples offer a practical illustration of the possibilities of methodological convergence between iconographic and textual representation in the course of ethnographic research.

Re-creating social memories

The geographical context from which the two examples were drawn is the village of Sendim (500 km from Lisbon), in the frontier region of Miranda do Douro, three kilometres west of the river Douro, in the section where it divides Portugal and Spain. The village has a population of about 2,000 inhabitants and had undergone rapid change during the past fifty years.

The first phase of ethnographic research, conducted at various times between 1993 and 1995, followed conventional methods, such as participant observation; archival research; collection of census data; life-histories and interviews. Nevertheless, a preliminary analysis of these materials (especially the series of interviews conducted with several elderly members of the village) showed that the informants' memories were very fluid and susceptible to considerable reinvention, which resulted in fragmentary accounts that rendered ethnographic description and interpretation rather difficult.

It seemed that some socially meaningful testimonies remained hidden in the informants' minds, beyond the reach of conventional interviewing. The recurrence of some issues then suggested the possibility of attempting to do pictographic recompositions, exploring informants' mental images of some of the past activities especially referred to during the interviews.

As early photographic images were very scarce and limited in their subjects (mainly individual and family portraits), we thought this could be achieved through ethnographic drawing, supported by further oral enquiry and also by photographs taken of the places and objects depicted from successive transcribed materials.

As a starting point, we took one of the topics privileged by our informants and concentrated on villagers' nostalgic memories of intense social links bonding together several villages in the region – a situation that was frequently contrasted with the present-day isolationism experienced by many communities in the Portuguese hinterland. In social terms, neighbouring Spanish villages were also considered part of the region and the frontier interchange was an important dimension of the social life of people from both sides of the natural and administrative frontier.

However, until the 1960s, crossing the border was a hazardous and sometimes fatal endeavour – particularly in winter with the dangerous rapids. There were no ferryboats, no crossing points, trade was forbidden, and travel to Spain was restricted. Nevertheless, as far as the older informants could remember, movements to and fro of people and smuggling across the border were customary and frequent. The use of imaginative techniques, far from the control of the frontier guards, was widespread in order to overcome the natural and administrative barriers.

As previously mentioned, we could not find any visual documentation about these actions, and our knowledge about them came primarily from old stories of smuggling in the region that were wrapped in a veil of secrecy and adventure.

Although profuse, present individual memories were revealed to be fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, owing partly to the old age of the informants and partly to the cessation of these activities. There were different versions of how the regularly turbulent river Douro was crossed, or of devices used to illegally shuttle goods over it. We decided to start with a provisional illustration drawn from one extract of the written field notes:

I can remember those times quite well, when we had to swim to cross the river. We did so in those old petrol tin boxes, the 30-litre ones, and were like a cube. Those boxes were empty and we closed them very well, to prevent the entrance of water and air. They were used like a buoy (to float).

Based on this type of description a first series of sketches was attempted, after collecting particular ethnographic details (materials used, measurements of some objects, the way people attached the box), which were necessary to make a drawing that proposed a representation as close as possible to informants' mental images (Figure 5.1).

Confronted with this re-creation made by the anthropologist-illustrator, our interlocutor became very impressed with our interest in his 'old-man histories' and I was able to capture his attention in a way that I had not managed to attain before. He went on with explanations, and some time later other villagers gather



Figure 5.1 Crossing the river using a petrol cube as buoy.

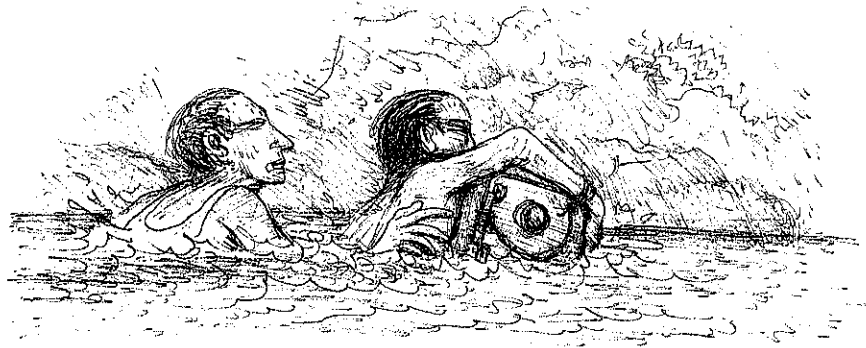


Figure 5.2 Helping to cross the river with a rope.

around us, watching the drawings and commenting on them. They remembered how they had also crossed, on what occasions they used to go to those Spanish villages, as well as criticizing the picture, suggesting corrections and giving ethnographic information with great enthusiasm. They focused, for instance on particular details:

The ones who knew how to swim, swam, we had to help the others. But there is something that is not correct. I remember that most of them didn't go like that, because they were afraid. We had to protect them with a rope around the body and one of us who could swim pushed him. (Figure 5.2)



Figure 5.3 Crossing the river in pairs.

Once again, the presentation of this second drawing attracted a great audience, especially of elderly people I had interviewed before. They followed very attentively my progressions with the work in hand and several times volunteered to go with me to the places where they could cross the river. On other occasions they also brought me special objects used in different crossing engines, of which I took photographs. It is interesting to note that with the exhibit of my photographs I gained a reputation as a museum collector, while showing Manuel João drawings seemed to produce the effect of jogging their memories, and each time something else came to their minds that inspired new sketches:

Oh, yes, it was like that . . . and other times in spite of pushing, we also pulled. We passed in pairs. One could swim and swam at the front. The other was tied to the petrol tin and was pulled with a rope. (Figure 5.3)

Thus, by offering the informants the possibility of actively participating in creating and modifying sketches, I could see that we were involving them in further constructing their discourses and reinterpreting their memories, which contributed to give coherence to fragmentary accounts and allowed the successive incorporation of new details into the narrative. This is another example of informants' feedback to previous sketches:

I still remember the cliff at *Guinda*. Nowadays it is under water but before it was a rock that entered the river, in a special place where the margins were very close. From there we passed the ropes to the other side. We linked one margin to the other with the ropes, like a pulley. That is how we crossed the river.

The way this engine worked was not evident to me and thinking about the details Manuel João would need to make another drawing I continued with the

interviewing, asking selective questions to learn how it actually worked, when it was used, who passed through the ropes, and so on. The next sequence of testimonies and sketches gives an idea of the interactive process which resulted in successive provisional sketches, each of which attempted to reflect information added incrementally by local interlocutors.

With the ropes, we threw a thread to the other side. We chose a good place, with high rocks on each riverbank so that this thread wouldn't drop into the water, mainly when the river's waters rose. So, first we threw the thread (we always brought a coverlet to put on the ground so that the threads wouldn't get tangled), and when it reached good hands, we laced it to a rope. (Figure 5.4)

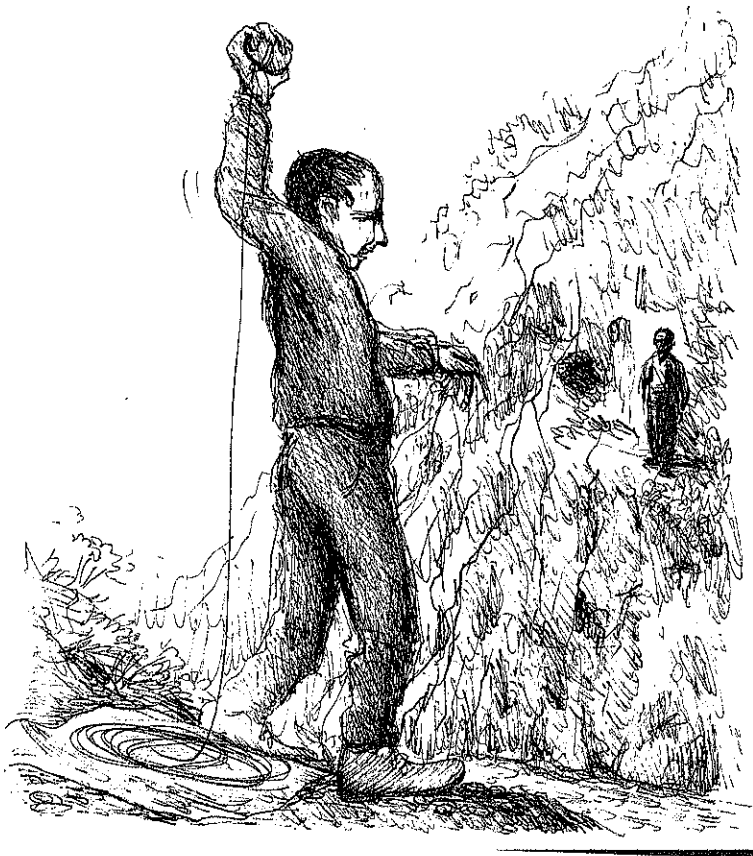


Figure 5.4 Throwing a thread to the other side.

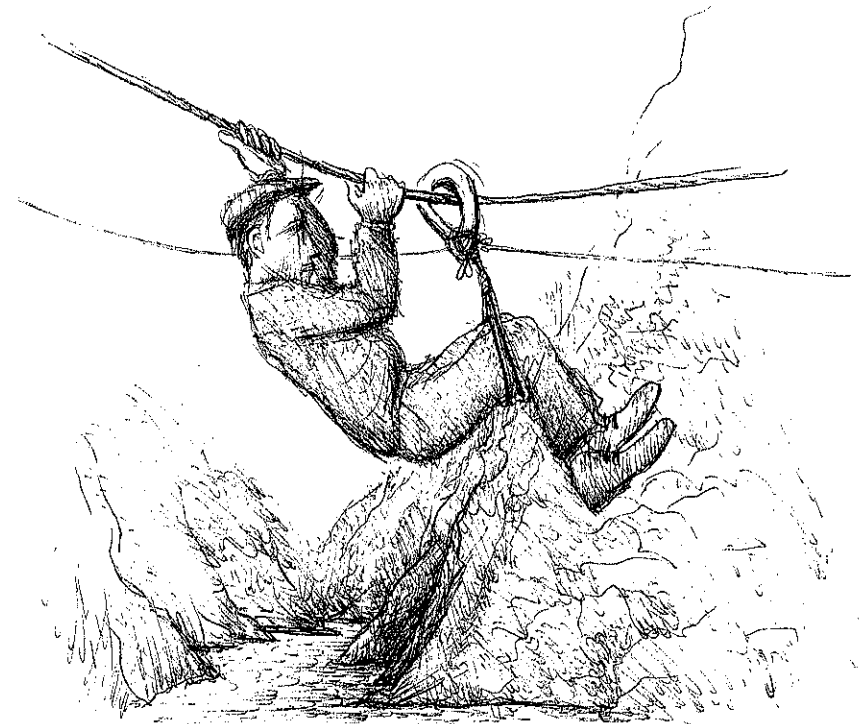


Figure 5.5 Crossing with the rope engine.

We crossed by means of the ropes especially when the winter came and the water was too cold. We used a yoke hoop (*trasga*) to cross safely. We put the hands there, fixed with a second rope around the legs, and we crossed the river along the main rope. It was not far, from one bank to the other, say, some 30 metres. (Figure 5.5)

We also used this engine to smuggle commercial goods. We prepared a packet which followed the course of this rope engine with a simple manipulation of the convenient angle of inclination. Like that, it could easily reach the other bank, escaping the control of the frontier guards (Figure 5.6).

Systems of crossing the river were not the only topics that were evoked during our long conversations and walks around the village, following ancient contraband routes. But our collaboration around this subject became so intense, that a myriad of ethnographic details smoothly emerged, helping to consolidate my knowledge on different dimensions of everyday life that guided future analysis and interpretations.

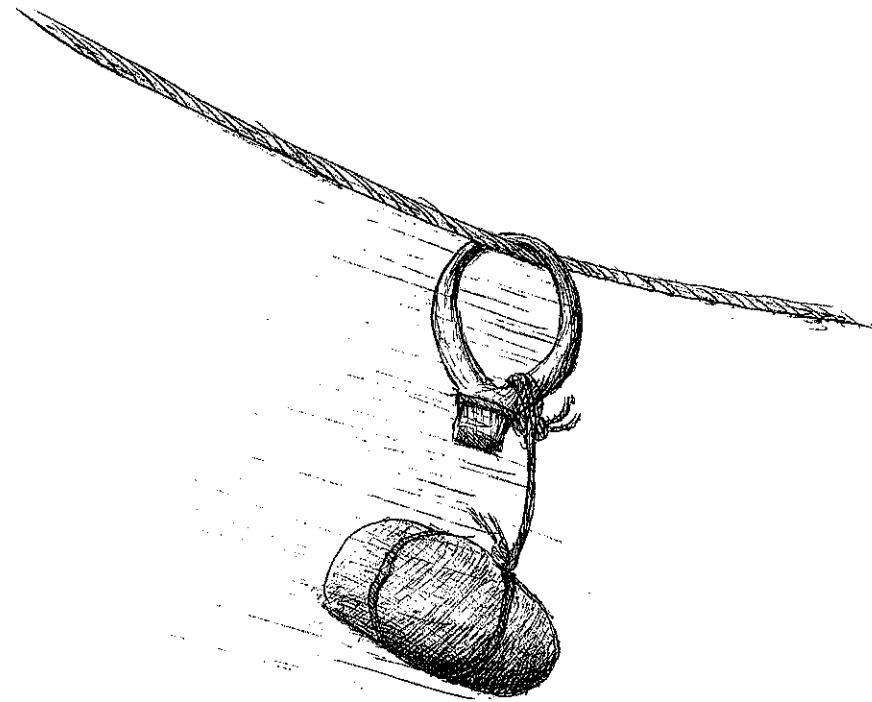


Figure 5.6 Smuggling commercial goods.

The recurrent valuation of frontier interchange, for instance, led me to understand that one of the main orientations of social change within the village, operating at community level, was precisely the strong interaction between neighbouring villages (where Spanish villages could be seen as an extreme example of inclusion) as contrasted with the current atomism of the village. This constituted one central line of research that was further developed and sustained by contrasted images (verbal and pictorial) in the final version of my thesis.

The attempt at re-creating, through illustrations, recurrent memories of local people contributed not only to 'documenting' oral history in a way that other visual media could not, but it also allowed consideration of the symbolic context that frames this recurrence, providing lines of interpretation for otherwise bizarre descriptions of pages of fragmentary written records.

Depicting social meaning from particular objects

Following a similar procedure, another series of drawings were made by Manuel João to illustrate my chapter on the changes that occurred at domestic group level, considered during the same period under observation. From the analysis

of my first field notes, two main lines of research had begun to emerge – the transformation of women's roles and the rupture between the work and domestic spheres.

When compared with ethnographic present, the main changes in household functions tend to affect women's roles in particular, whose traditional place within the domestic group seems to have become much less visible or socially recognized. This situation could also be supported by demographic trends, which show a steeper rise in young women migrants compared with young men.

Local middle-aged women had experienced those changes very intensively. Their life histories were filled with nostalgic childhood memories, evoked through descriptions of vivid situations where the strong intertwining between agricultural work and family life was a recurrent theme.

In an old craftsman's workshop, one of his wooden carvings hanging on the wall had caught my attention. It was a rectangular wooden tray entitled 'village life before machines'. On it, a range of traditional local occupations were sculptured. One of the pictures represented a woman with her children on her back while she was ploughing the fields. The carver seemed to have captured a powerful image of situations described by informants, where the intertwining of work and family was explicitly depicted.

I enthusiastically decided to take a photograph but was disappointed. Besides it not being a very good photograph, it contained 'too much' and the ambience that had so impressed me was lost.

The visual impact of an alternative pen drawing could be, I thought, much more expressive and appropriate. I brought the photograph with me and, based on it, Manuel João made a drawing where he depicted only the elements necessary to make explicit our interpretations of informants' discourses, this time supported by the local carver's own figurative representations (Figure 5.7).

Once again this suggestive drawing constituted a starting point for evoking villagers' childhood memories, and other details were brought into our

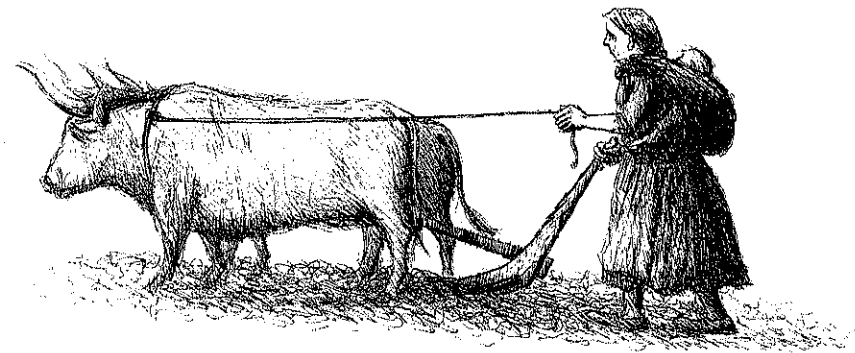


Figure 5.7 Woman ploughing a field with children on her back.



Figure 5.8 Baby safely sat down in a furrow covered by a coverlet.

conversations. ‘Those old times were hard work times!’ commented one of the women on seeing the picture. ‘And most of the time we all went to the fields. If children were still young we carried them on our backs, just like that. But as they began to walk we would sit them down in a furrow with a coverlet under them while we ploughed one furrow after another’ (Figure 5.8).

Our interpretations (made more explicit through visual images) suggested that we were approaching relevant dimensions of oral history, which in return informants corroborated by adding ethnographic information about different situations, but where the implicit subject of the pictorial proposals continued to be central.

To give a practical illustration of this interactive process – a process that guided research from written materials to pictorial re-creations and back again, each time casting new light on particular events or objects – I will concentrate on one of my favourite drawings, that constitutes an important visual complement of main arguments developed in that part of my thesis where changes in the domestic group were discussed.

This peculiar drawing, representing a woman rocking her baby’s cradle with the foot while she was hand-spinning, suggests, very explicitly, that the strong interconnection between family and work domains operated not only outdoors but also within household space, where women’s tasks underline similar strong complementarities (Figure 5.9). That drawing was followed by focused sketches



Figure 5.9 Woman hand-spinning and rocking her children.

of some of its constituent elements, each of which carried its own particular ethnographic details that were brought to light by informants at the simple confrontation with the image.

The first sketch represents a spindle (local name and measurements included), a distaff and a close-up of the distaff’s head. According to local people, a chick-pea was often placed inside the distaff’s head. It rocked with the movement of the distaff as the women were hand-spinning. Echoing informants’ memories, this functionality of the object, which could not be ‘seen’ in the last drawing, became a central support to the interpretation of the previous picture (Figure 5.10).

The second sketch, derived also from the initial picture, shows detailed information about another important element – this time it was the old cradle that captured our eye. When I was gathering the details that Manuel João needed to make his drawing (measurements, fixing system, type of wood), people would bring me old cradles and talk about their childhood memories, when agriculture was the main economic activity in the village.

During one of these conversations, they explained how old cradles were frequently made by the future father, who recycled useless wooden wheels of traditional agricultural carts. This interesting explanation – that once again suggests the continuity of work and family even in the slightest details of particular

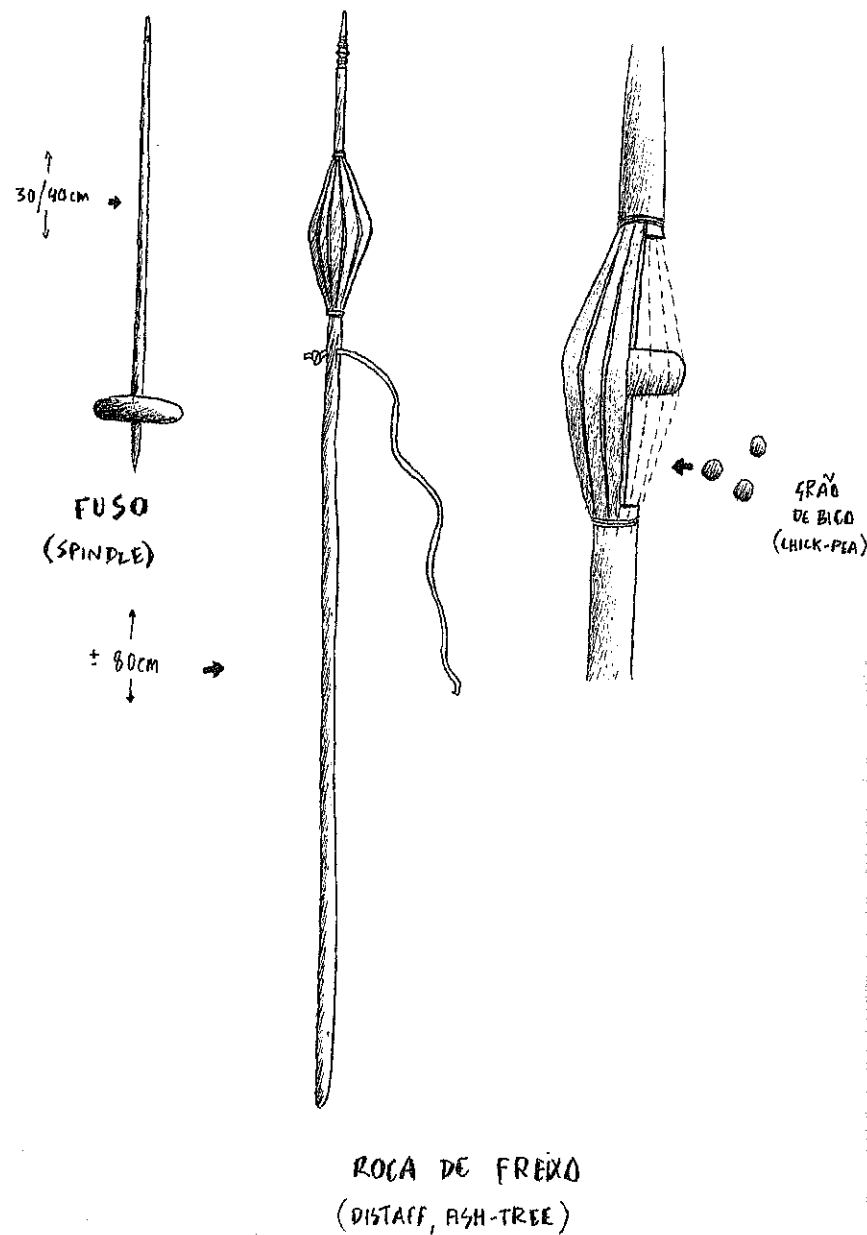


Figure 5.10 Detail of spindle and distaff.

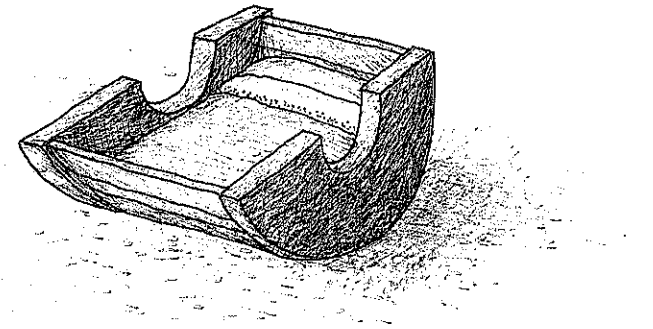


Figure 5.11 Using recycled wooden wheels to make a cradle.

objects – inspired the next drawing that completes this sequence (Figure 5.11). This way of proceeding allowed us not only to enlarge the narrative by rendering explicit, through visual representations, the implicit meaning of verbal records, but it also gave us the possibility of discovering features of material culture, which could be depicted and interrogated through a continuous crossover between words and images.

Drawings and other visual methods

This process of visually reconstructing local memories allowed us to achieve privileged relations with selected informants. In turn, this led to a more systematic and accurate processing of their memories and discourses to explore certain dimensions of social change.

Pictorial representation served as a mnemonic device, ensuring a comprehensive coverage of the context in which particular events and objects acquired cultural significance, helping to render ‘visible’ implicit meanings abstracted from the interviews. By offering local interlocutors the possibility of actively participating in creating, modifying and suggesting corrections to the sketches, it involved them in further constructing their discourses and reinterpreting their memories.

Thus, in methodological terms, the aesthetic and representational power of this approach became a valuable complement of lineal verbal expression at different stages of research, from the initial data collection to the final writing. On the other hand, the teamwork conducted by researcher and artist also seemed to enrich the traditional oral enquiry through a highly systematic interactive process of selective interviewing and photographing, developed in order to generate the many details that enabled us to represent pictorially the informants’ descriptions.

When compared with other visual media (photography, film or video), the advantages of using drawings in anthropological representation and analysis

have been very expressively summarised by the editor of *Robert Powell Himalayan Drawings*:

Drawings, moreover, can be detached from the natural conditions in which their motifs are bound; they can isolate, single out, decontextualise; they can transport their subjects into different surroundings; they can take imaginary viewpoints. This makes drawings capable of conceptual idealisation and abstraction; of visually presenting symbolical significance; of depicting reality beyond realism; of transcending.

(Oppitz 2002: 122)

Our research experiences demonstrate the communicative power of drawings when interacting with local informants and their ability to open paths to reflexivity – an issue which has been addressed in relation to photography and video in different social contexts. The problem of whether to use particular visual media (or combination of media), as Pink points out, is in fact a question of *appropriateness*: ‘This includes considering how visual methods, images and technologies will be interpreted by individuals in the cultures where research will be done, in addition to assessing how well visual methods suit the aims of specific projects’ (2001: 31). Thus, all possible methods of visual recording must be scrutinised and their adequacy put to the test.

It could be argued that as regards the use of drawings in anthropology, unless one has that special skill, it is easier to find a good camera (or indeed, a good cameraman) than a good illustrator. But it would be regrettable if this difficulty led us to ignore the potential offered by the plasticity of drawing, when new technologies open up so many interesting opportunities for convergence between words and images to construct and represent anthropological knowledge.

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