An image says more than words

a qualitative essay about the pictorial language
of the children and youth
in West Africa

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The pictorial language of the Swedish children is characterized by the idea that a “good” drawing should be in the right perspective and as photographically realistic as possible. This is a study about the pictorial language of the children in the Gambia and Senegal. Is the pictorial language different with the children living in a culture that has a stronger tradition of spoken word and visual communication than the children living in the western civilisation?

With the help of different theories concerning children’s creating of art, this study is trying to sort out the differences. It is also explaining about different theories when it comes to development stages in the children’s drawings and how the culture, tradition and conventions influence both the pictorial grammar and the ideal image.

The study is based on drawings collected in schools in The Gambia and Senegal and the drawings are analysed with the help of theories in Karin Aronssons “Barns världar – barns bilder”. The study is also based on observations and interviews with children and teachers in a school in the Gambia.

Sökord: Pictorial language, children, West Africa
Acknowledgement:

I want to thank Baboucarr Etu N’dow for letting me into his family and for having all the discussions with me about life, existence and art in different cultures. Without him I wouldn’t have been able to live the “African” life and grasp the differences and similarities of people, art and cultures as he gave me the possibility to do. Being a contemporary artist in the Gambia with a background of studying at the Konstakademien in Holland, and deciding to come back to the Gambia and making his life and future there, he is an encouragement and a hope to a lot of young people in the Gambia. He is a true “bridge-builder” between cultures and I wish there were more people like him.
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1 Introduction - Africa in my dreams

1.1 An image says more than a thousand words

There is an image in my mind. The image shows a beautiful African woman with a colourful cloth wrapped around her waist, she wears nothing on her chest but has many beads and necklaces around her neck and arms. A beautiful red cloth is also wrapped around her head. Behind her you can see a small hut that seems to be made out of clay and the roof is made of grass. The sun is high and the shadows and contrasts are strong in the picture. The woman is holding a baby in her arms. The baby is white. It’s fair skin and blond hair stands in strong contrast to the dark complexion and colourful appearance of the woman.

The baby is me, and the photo was taken in South Africa in 1971 and I was one year old. My parents had moved there temporarily because my father was working there. As I moved to Sweden when I was only two years old my only memories from that time are some fading photos in an old photo album at my parent’s house. But ever since I was a little girl and I saw that picture I have been dreaming about going there again. For me, that picture said more than a thousand words. I remember daydreaming about how my life would have turned out if we had stayed there or how the woman and her children’s life were like.

When I started studying to become an arts teacher a thought began to take form. I wanted to find out more about the culture, life, traditions, art and children in an African country. After participating in art classes in different schools in Sweden the impression I get is that the children often have an idea that a “nice” drawing should be in the right scale, perspective and as photographically realistic as possible. This kind of visual ideal could be called naturalism or photographic realism. But when you think about African art; strong colours, symbols, expressive motives and tradition comes into mind rather than naturalistic, realistic art. Does this kind of visual ideal effect the children’s way of creating their drawings or are the stages of development universal?

Knowing how strong impression an image can make on people, I wanted to find out more about the visual communication in a country where the spoken word has been more important than the written and also I wanted to find out if the visual language of the African children differs from the Swedish children. This understanding for visual communication and cultural
exchange within and between cultures will be a significant experience for me both as a person and in my profession.

1.2 The purpose of my study
The purpose of the study is to create a wider knowledge and present the creativity and visual language of the children in West Africa. Through this, I want to create a wider intercultural perspective and understanding for children that comes from different cultures and backgrounds.

1.3 Question at issue
Main question:
How do the children in West Africa use their visual language?

Sub questions:
How is art used in the schools? Is it a subject? What materials do they use?
Western children have a naturalistic image ideal, is that so in West Africa too?
Do the children try to express more/less or something different in their drawings?
What local conventions can you find in the drawings?
Does Islam affect the pictorial grammar? How?
What kind of symbols, traditions or values can you find in their drawings?
Do the children have the chance to develop their visual language outside school? How?

1.4 Delimitations
The analysing and looking into the amazing world of the children’s drawings will mostly be based on the theories and conceptions in Karin Aronssons book: “Barns världar-Barns bilder.”
In the following chapter some of these theories and conceptions will be presented and later I will analyse the drawings I have collected using these conceptions and theories. My intention is not to analyse drawings made by Swedish children. In the beginning I have made a rather general conclusion of their pictorial language and based on that I will try to analyse and look for differences in the drawings made of African children. I will also mostly have the empirical basis on drawings and paintings made by children in the early teens and not by younger children. The reason for that can be found in chapter 3.1.
2 Theories and conceptions

2.1 “Barns världar – barns bilder”

In Karin Aronssons book “Barns världar – barns bilder” (1997) she describes different theories regarding art created by children in different cultures and countries, and also presents different theories when it comes to the stages of development in children’s drawings. She also discusses how the cultures, conventions and values influence both how the children create their art and what is considered to be an ideal picture. What is thought of as an immature drawing in one culture can be a local convention or a narrative strategy in another (Aronsson, 1997 s.228).

2.2 Conventional or universal theory

There are two main types of theories concerning children’s creating of drawings, the conventional theory and the universal theory:

In the conventional theory the art science has emphasized the cultural influence on the art; one image leads to a new image and drawings are inspired by local conventions rather than the actual perception. Aronsson claims Gombrich (Gombrich, E.H. 1980) is the main source for this theory but also mentions Brent and Marjorie Wilson as two American spokesmen for this theory (Wilson, B. & Wilson, M. 1982). They have studied and found a lot of local conventions around the world. Examples of local conventions will be given in chapter 2.3.

In the universal theory the perception and the universal features in itself and the development through stages are the most important issue. Herbert Read – who Marie Bendroth Karlsson explained was a very important arts pedagogue in England during the 20th century - meant that we should try to keep the child’s natural openmindness; the individual creating of a picture can only be reached without interference from adults (Bendroth Karlsson, M. 1998).

Aronsson has concluded the theories with the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of image</th>
<th>Conventional theory</th>
<th>Universal theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development through</td>
<td>culture, surrounding images</td>
<td>stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>cultural codes</td>
<td>own perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through</td>
<td>perception, creative imitating</td>
<td>perception, creative isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from</td>
<td>other children, teachers</td>
<td>yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main theory by</td>
<td>Gombrich</td>
<td>Read</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Barns världar - barns bilder, Karin Aronsson, 1997 s.148)
2.3 The pictorial grammar

Different cultures have different values, conventions and rules in the pictorial language and this can be called a pictorial grammar. This pictorial grammar changes through time and culture. Aronsson (1997) claims several comparative studies has shown that the pictorial language differs between children in for instance urban western environments and children in the non-western countryside (Dennis, 1966). What you can tell and not tell in your drawing is also partly limited by the unwritten rules of your culture for what can be said and not in an image (Aronsson, 1997. s230). For instance the Islamic religion has a tradition of not showing people in images which of course will influence the frequency of this happening in the children’s drawings. This is also a kind of pictorial grammar.

These studies can be placed within the theory of convention and show that images influences and generates new images (Aronsson, 1997) and the culture and traditions affect the pictorial grammar and language of the children.

After the 1\textsuperscript{st} world war Paget (1932) gathered more than 60 000 drawings from non-western children. Here he found a lot of local conventions, i.e. stereotyped images for a certain group or culture. For instance you only find pinheads and bi-triangular torsos in west Africa (See example of pinhead figure on the next page). Some of the conventions such as the two-eyed profile was found in almost every culture in the beginning of the last century, but has now almost vanished. (Wilson, M.B.1982). This shows that the local influences change not only between cultures but also with time. Here are some examples of forms in drawing people that has been found in different cultures and periods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="two-eyed-profile.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>two-eyed profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="moon-face.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>moon face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="profiled-head-foot.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>profiled head-foot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="Islamic-torso.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Islamic torso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="bi-triangular-torso.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>bi-triangular torso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="Neolithic-face.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Neolithic face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="back-hanged-arms.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>back hanged arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="bottle-torso.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>bottle torso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="triangular-torso.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>triangular torso</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Barns världar - barns bilder, Karin Aronsson, 1997 s.232)
2.4 Stages of development
Within the universal theory there has been a lot of research during the last century which mainly has been emphasizing on the children's artistical development through stages. Norm tables for a “normal” development were formed and they were used as diagnostic tests and judgement of the children’s emotional welfare (Goodenough, 1926). The research has also mostly concentrated on the finished product and not on the surrounding in which the drawing was made or on the working process itself.

2.5 The Renaissance ideal
As mentioned before different cultures have different pictorial grammar and ideal for how an image should look like. The western civilisation seems to have taken the Renaissance as the ideal artistic view. The Renaissance perspective shows the image from a stationary perspective, as through the lens of a camera. This could also be called naturalism or photographic realism (Aronsson, 1997). The stages of development were created from a naturalistic point of view and naturalistic pictures and images are preferred and premiered in many western schools, libraries, hospitals etcetera.

2.6 The U-curve of artistic creativity
Karin Aronsson has explained about the u-curve of artistic development in her book. From a naturalistic point of view the children’s drawings will become more “developed” and “correct” the older the child gets (Goodenough, 1926). The naturalism will be judged according to the realism and amount of depth and 3-dimensionality in the drawing:
But some think that the originality and creativity in the children’s drawings will reduce because of the emphasis on written language and rational thinking in school. (Aronsson, 1997) They say that the curve of development from an artistic, creative point of view will be falling:

When other views than the naturalistic is taken into consideration, like expression, colour, originality or composition, many modern artists mean that the small unaffected child creates original and expressive drawings before they start school and in the later teen ages when they finish school. Gardner & Winner (1982) mean that the curve of artistic creativity should be like a u-form. They mean that many of the children’s drawings in school are stereotype and cliché, but original and expressive in the early age and late teens.

(Barns världar – barns bilder, Karin Aronsson, 1997 s.19-21)
But the pictorial grammar is affected by the culture and the environment which naturally also must affect the pictorial language of the children and with this in mind, this kind of measuring of children’s intelligence or maturity by looking at the drawings with a naturalistic ideal, and only developing through stages, will be a very blunt instrument. Especially when looking at the drawings created by children from another culture, who may not have the same traditions, conventions or image ideal, and also not the same possibilities and variations in material as western children do. This brings us to another way of expression:

2.7 Logical realism
If the conventional theory is used, children’s drawings should be looked upon also with a perspective of values and not only from a naturalistic point of view. Children express their values in their drawings. They sometimes draw things with a hierarchy of importance rather than a stationary objective view. They also may want to tell you more in the drawing than you actually could see (Aronsson, 1997).

In the beginning of the last century George Henri Luquet presented theories about children drawing what they see – visual realism, and what they know – logical realism. In the logical realism the child tries to express and present everything they know in the drawing, even things that would be invisible from an objective perspective, for example furniture inside the house or gifts inside the parcel. Aronsson has divided Luquets logical realism into 5 types of perspective:

- transparence
- tangence
- mixed perspective
- deviation
- exaggerated size

(Barns världar - barns bilder, Karin Aronsson, 1997 s.59)
On the next page these terms will be explained more detailed.
Transparence is when you see objects through walls or behind other things. Tangence is when lines touch each other but do not cross, for example when a hat balances on top of the head. When a house is showing three sides at the same time, or a face is a two-eyed profile, this is an example of mixed perspective. Deviation means that the drawing shows the objects spread out often from above, for instance when a fence that is looked upon from above seem to lay down flat on the ground. Size exaggeration shows the objects in the wrong size according to the stationary naturalistic perspective, but has another meaning. The size tells you the amount of importance or value of the object, for example when the new puppy dog in the family is larger than the family members. (Aronsson, 1997) In chapter 4 examples of logical realism will be presented.

These types of logic realism could all be considered as narrative strategies of telling you more in the drawing than you actually would see in reality, rather than being a sign of immaturity or undeveloped drawing skills. Luquet meant that this was not a lower stage of development but an alternative way or a narrative strategy of showing more in the picture than with a stationary perspective like through the lens of a camera. The eye of a camera can only show what’s on the surface; the artistic eye can also show the invisible!

As you may have noticed, Luquet is placed under the theory of convention and not under the universal theory as Aronsson did (1997). Despite the fact that Luquet made conclusions about the children developing through stages, his theories about logical realism is placed under the theory of convention because it would be impossible to draw something you know without having any values in it or not being affected at all from your culture when you do so. The difficulties of placing, for example Luquet, under the right theory only shows that it is impossible to exclude any of these theories when looking on children’s drawings.

Another sign of that you could not exclude any of these theories is that even Jan Thomaeus – who became known as Herbert Reads “biggest prophet” in Sweden – meant that the environment had more influence than the character. Thomaeus found the cultural influence more essential than the biological (Bendroth Karlsson, M. 1998).

However, development stages should also not be excluded when looking on children’s drawings. Most scientists believe that you can not exclude any of these theories and you have
to acknowledge both the development stages of the individual child and the influence of the local culture and surroundings, and also the social context and the interaction between the child and people around the child.

2.8 Sociocultural development

This leads us to a third aspect that must be taken into consideration. Only drawings and the finished result have been mentioned nothing has been said about the process in which it was made. From a sociocultural point of view (Vygotskij, 1995) the development of the children’s pictorial language happens by participation and communication with other people and the children create their drawings in a social context. Vygotskij assumes from that learning takes place in the interaction with the outside world, it is in the social interaction the child gets it’s tools for thoughts and action (Bendroth Karlsson, 1998). This means that the social context, and also the total situation, in which the drawing takes place is of very significant importance when you analyse the creativity and expression of the child.
3 Method

3.1 Work, observe and interview

A scholarship from SIDA called MFS (Minor Field Studies) gave me the possibility to spend two months in the Gambia and Senegal and this gave me the opportunity to work, observe, interview and most important collect drawings from the children both in and outside school. Since my intention was to study and analyse the pictorial language of the West African children the main source of empirie was drawings made by the children and observe the process in which the drawings were made. This means that the main method was to gather drawings and other examples of visual expression made by the children. Attending art lessons and observing the pedagogic and the process was also important. Information was also gathered by visiting schools and attending as much art lessons as possible. The methods by observing, participating and observing, analysing material and conduct semi structured interviews are all ways of doing a qualitative study (Holme & Solvang, 1997). This method of performing the study was naturally suitable for this investigation as for opposite the quantitative study deal with the information by amounts and figures and becomes more like a statistic analyse (Holme & Solvang, 1997).

During the two months I was in the Gambia and Senegal I visited primary schools and basic schools, attended lessons in an upper basic school for two weeks, attended lessons and workshops in Satang Jabang in Senegal which is a school for young women where they learn to sew, cook, make batik, do craft and art etcetera. I also visited The Gambian college where I met the art teacher students (they study 2 1/2 years to become arts teachers) with whom I later had a work-shop with in Tunbung Artvillage. There we also had work-shops together with a group of art teacher students from Sweden, making art by using the local knowledge and material from that area. Interviews were conducted with teachers and pupils and in the Junior secondary school in Tujareng I attended and gave lessons with four 9th grade classes in arts and craft.

I interviewed 3 teachers and these are examples of semi structured questions I asked:

Is art a subject i your school? From what grade? How many hours a week?
What materials and techniques do you use? Do you teach perspective drawing?
What areas of arts and craft do you teach in the subject?
I interviewed 5 pupils and these are examples of semi structured questions I asked:
What do you think about the subject arts and craft?
What areas in the subject do you like the most?
How should a “nice” drawing look like? What qualities makes it “good”?
Did you learn perspective drawing?
Do you think there is a possibility of making a future as an artist?

In the beginning I planned to attend lessons in the primary and basic schools too, but after visiting some of these schools I realized that it would take to much time before they would get used to me and get back to their “normal” routines. The small children always get very excited when they see a white person and they yell “-Toubab, toubab!” and they want to touch you and be close to you. This is very nice, but I wanted to have a school situation that was as unaffected as possible with my presence. That is why I decided to stay with the 9th graders and this turned out to be a good decision. Here I got the chance to get to know the pupils and interview them and the teachers. I also gave them an exercise that would create drawings for my study. The exercise was; “Draw your home.” I told them that home could be many things; the house, family, the compound, the village, places they hang out etc. I was hoping this would give me drawings not only with their houses but also where you could see and get an understanding about their way of life and surroundings.

I also gathered drawings from other lessons and drawings made by the children outside school. Altogether I got over 120 drawings from the children in the Gambia. I also got the chance to take photos of art and paintings made by the young women in Satang Jabang and paintings made by children in Gambia when a very popular TV-show for kids about making art was broadcasted a few years ago.
3.2 Tujareng junior secondary school

Tujareng junior secondary school is an average secondary school in the countryside in the Gambia with almost 800 students from grade 7-9. The school covers a large area and some of the pupils have almost 10 km to walk, go with bicycle or hitchhike to come to school. The students have school uniforms as in all Gambian schools. Tujareng junior secondary has about 20 teachers and each class has 40-50 pupils. The teachers have very low salary and they make about 1200 dalasi/month (40 €). The pupils pay 300 dalasi/term but the girls have to pay less because they are sponsored by the government who want to encourage more girls to go to school. This effort has paid off and the number of girls going to school is steadily increasing. The language used in the schools in the Gambia is English. Very few schools give the opportunity to study the local language since there are so many local languages that this would be very difficult to practice. The main subjects are English, maths, general science, environmental and society science and other subjects are for example arts and craft, home science, French, metal and wood craft and Arabic (the holy Koran).

Arts and craft is a subject in most Gambian and Senegal schools since grade 7. Although the shortage of material does make this subject, and other “practical” subjects, mostly theoretical. The pedagogic that is mostly used is teaching and lecturing from the blackboard. The subject takes about 1,5h/week and covers many of the different areas within arts and craft; for example drawing, lettering, painting, printing, design, poster work, clay, carving etc.

In the end of grade nine, the students in the Gambia will have national exams in all the subjects they have studied and this is when they will get their marks for the first time. Before that they will only have verbal judgements. See the enclosed example of national exam for arts and craft.
4 Result and conclusions

In this chapter I will present drawings and make analyses and conclusions linked to my questions and the theories and conceptions at the same time as I find it difficult to split the drawings from the analysis and conclusions.

4.1 Lack of material

As mentioned before arts and craft is a subject in West African schools, but because of the lack of material unfortunately the subject most of the time is purely theoretical. However the subject seems to be quite popular among the students and surprisingly many have the ambition to become an artist. In the 9th grade when they have their final exam they will have the chance to do some practical work but then they have to pay the material by themselves which not everybody can afford.

4.2 Universal theory and development stages

This lack of material throughout the school time which disables the children to practice on their drawing skills is really obvious if you look at the development stages with a naturalistic point of view (Goodenough, 1926). Many of the pupils seem to be several years behind the Swedish pupils when it comes to draw with a Renaissance perspective. Some of the children in grade nine were still drawing head-foot figures.

However, if the students get access to some material and a chance to practice on their drawing they seem to “catch up” amazingly fast. The children who had a chance to practice at home or get some help from a local artist showed the same level of development as Swedish children on the work I did see outside school. For instance the young women at Satang Jabang who had finished secondary school and now had the opportunity of practice and access of material created beautiful designs, paintings and batik.

Binta’s drawing of her home
The children that got a chance to work with some local artists when a popular TV-show for children about art was being broadcasted also showed wonderful work with symbolism, colour and expression. Although the impression you get is that some of the drawings were immature, perspective drawing was thought and many of the pupils used the ruler to get the lines accurate and they tried very hard to get the houses in the right perspective. The naturalistic and realistic drawing (Aronsson, 1997) seemed to be the ideal also in the African schools.

4.3 Conventional theory and logical realism
If you look at the children’s drawings with the conventional theory in mind you will find a lot of Luquet’s “logical realism” in their creations (Aronsson, 1997). They want to tell you more with the drawing than you would actually see in reality and they used all the methods of logical realism to be able to do that.

A lot of children used transparence (Aronsson, 1997) to show what is inside for instance buildings and cars. A pupil in the 9th grade of course understand that you could not actually see through the walls but obviously they wanted to show things they found important like the bed, table, sofa or TV. Many children also drew the water cooler inside the house which is a large ceramic jar for keeping the drinking water. This tells you the importance of the water and also tells you something about the everyday life. There were not so many people inside the houses and if there were people in the drawing they were normally outside.
This is where most of the people spend the time; outside cooking, playing, drinking tea, eating, talking, watching TV etc. Therefore there were seldom people in the houses.

There were a lot of examples of tangence (Aronsson, 1997) in the drawings. The children tend not to want any lines to cross, and only a few had found out that you can make an impression of depth by overlapping and putting one object in front of another like Jafatou so neatly have done with the houses. Instead most of the children used tangence to put the houses next to each other or to put something on top of the table.

The amount of houses on the compound also tells you something about how the big families live together – they call it the “extended family”. Several families can live together in one compound and the men stay in one house or room and the women in another, as Lamin wrote on his drawing: “Boys house only!”
On Lamin’s drawing you can also see an example of deviation (Aronsson, 1997) on the people dancing in a circle. This was a common way of drawing the houses on the compound and the fence around it, as you also can see in Ebrima’s drawing.

He has neatly created a very symmetric pattern by using deviation to put the houses in a square. Ebrima has also used mixed perspective by showing 3 sides of the houses at the same time and this helps to make the drawing nice and symmetric. You can see that he has been using the ruler to make the lines accurate and this was also a common phenomenon. The pupils wanted to create nice drawings and obviously they thought if they used the ruler to make the lines accurate, this would help to make the drawing more accurate and in perspective.

Some of them even used the ruler to draw the trees and the branches on the trees like Binta and Saffiatou did in their drawings.
On Saffiatou’s drawing you can see the well up in the left corner. The well was present in almost all of the drawings of the children’s homes and again this shows how important the water is and the well on the compound is a sign of comfort because you don’t have to walk a long way to get water. In some of the drawings the well is almost as big as the house and this also shows the importance of the well by using exaggerated size (Aronsson, 1997).

The mortar is an important and typical African tool in the cooking and is often seen in the drawings in exaggerated size like in Mariama’s drawing.

Another sign of comfort and modern conveniences is the electricity and the lights and TV are often presented like in Mariama’s and Makaddy’s drawings. Makaddy has even emphasized that the TV is electrical so that there will be no misunderstandings. He has also added some extraordinary objects like bombs, a giraffe, and a rhinoceros. This was rather unusual because most of the animals in the drawings were domestic.
4.4 Islamic influences

Islam has a tradition of not showing human beings in images and this probably affected the amount of people in the drawings. Not many of the drawings contained people even if I encouraged the children to draw their family. If there were people in the drawings they often were doing some kind of work like getting water, working on the farms, cooking, feeding the animals etc.

Just a few of the drawings contained children playing like Omar and Borry’s boys playing football.

Otherwise I could not find any affects from the Islamic religion in the children’s drawings.
4.5 Local conventions

Examples of local conventions (Aronsson, 1997) that I found in the drawings were for instance the mud houses which very few families actually had on their compounds but they drew them anyway probably because it’s considered typical African.

Fatou has made beautiful hut houses in her drawing. The well and the palm trees make it look very African.

Also, if there were people on the drawings, many of them were so called Neolithic faces. This was a very common way of drawing faces in the Gambia but is hardly ever seen in the Swedish children’s drawings. The pinhead figure which is known as typical in West African art (Aronsson, 1997) was not something I found in the children’s drawings.

Mariama has drawn a Neolithic face on the woman which can be called a local convention (Aronsson, 1997).

Another thing that I found in a lot of drawings was the way the pupils used lines and colours to create symmetric and sometimes almost graphical patterns as you can see in Famara’s drawing.

The trees on Famara’s drawing looks like a beautiful pattern.
4.6 Art outside school

As mentioned before most of the children do not get the chance to develop their drawing skills outside school because the lack of material at home but of course some of the children were very interested and they were drawing at anything they could find using whatever they could find to draw with. I managed to collect some drawings made of the children outside school and some of them showed a bit different content. For example there could be more serious issues in the drawings like fighting AIDS or the backsides of drug abuse. These drawings reminded me very much about the propagandic signs you can see along the roads about serious matters of this kind.

Many artists in the Gambia are making the living along with their art by making posters, painting signs, printing T-shirts, carving sculptures etcetera. And these drawings with serious messages maybe are examples of the pupils preparing for this kind of work. It can also be a sign of local convention (Aronsson, 1997) as for images around them inspiring and leading to new images and drawings. As mentioned earlier some children also got help and inspiration by local artists and this was very interesting to see as I did not see very many examples of paintings made by children because the shortage of paint, brushes and canvas. But the paintings I did see were beautiful and contained symbols and expression of value like for example the value of the family or traditional symbols like the painting depicting the fertility dolls.

"Edward elephant says help stop AIDS."
Drawing by a boy in 9th grade.

"The sad end of drug abuse"
Drawing by a boy in 9th grade.

Woman holding her baby on the left. You can also see the mortar on this painting which is a typical African cooking tool. On the right, African fertility dolls. These fertility dolls give good luck when a woman wants to become, or when she already is pregnant.
Acrylic paintings made by African children with guidance from local artists.
4.7 Validity

One area in which my study lacks the most is that I did not have very many chances to have
discussions and conversations with the children about their drawings. I would have wanted to
give them the possibility to look at their own and each others work and discuss what they had
done and how and why. I also would have wanted to look at other pictures and works of art
and have discussions about them and analyse the pictures. This is in my opinion one of the
most important things in the process of creating something; to be able to look at your own and
other work and discuss and make reflections about what you have done and how and why.

I also would have wanted to be able to spend time with the smaller children to see how and
when they have the chance to express themselves visually. But this unfortunately I felt was
impossible as I mentioned in my explanation about my methods.

The study also could have contained more material from outside school, but it was actually
hard to gather this kind of material, and that’s why most of the material comes from school.

The literature I have used is obviously Karin Aronssons “Barns världar – barns bilder” (1997)
and also Marie Bendroth Karlssons “Bildskapande i förskola och skola” (1998). Their
interpretation of great art pedagogues and other pedagogue’s theories like Luquet, Paget,
Read Gombrich, Goodenough and Vygotskij is consequently the interpretation I also have
made. Some of these titles can seem very old but there are not very many studies made about
children’s pictorial language, especially non-western children.
5 Analysis

Art is a subject in most West African schools but the name of the subject is arts & craft and covers a lot of areas within arts and craft. However the subject is unfortunately mostly theoretical because the shortage of material. This lack of material and rare chances of practical work affects the children’s pictorial language from a naturalistic point of view (Aronsson, 1997) in a sense that they seem to be a few years after the Swedish children according to development stages. The image ideal seems to be the naturalistic and photographically realistic with the African children too because they wanted to draw realistic and they thought a “nice” drawing should be “correct” and used the ruler to make it so. However the wish to express what they want and tell you a lot in the drawings is obvious and they use a lot of methods to do that. For example they use transparence to show what’s inside the house or size exaggeration to show important objects in the drawing. This is called logical realism; the children draw what they know rather than what they see – visual realism (Aronsson, 1997). I found very many examples of this in the drawings. Local conventions found in the drawings are for example the Neolithic face which is rarely seen in the Swedish children’s drawings (Aronsson, 1997). Symbols of tradition and value are for instance the well that very often is present in the drawings. Also the mud houses or the mortar tells you about traditions and everyday life. The only way that Islam seems to affect the pictorial grammar (Aronsson, 1997) is that there are not so often people in the drawings. The children do not get very much possibilities to practise on their drawing skills outside school because the lack of material at home. But drawing is not the only way of visual communication/art and one should not forget the long tradition of batik, fabric printing, sculpturing, pottering and also the visual communication through the dancing which many young people practice from an early age. However the intention of my study was not to study this kind of visual expression but can maybe be an area of future studies.
6 Discussion

When I went to Africa I had an idea that there would be rather big differences in the pictorial language of the children living in a culture that had a stronger tradition of spoken word and visual communication than the children living in the western civilisation with the written word being the most important way of communication. This turned out to be only partly the truth. The visual language of the children was not so different in Africa than in Sweden. Many of the pleasures and problems were similar, like for instance the persistent using of the ruler to make lines accurate and straight. Even the trees and the branches on the trees were drawn with the ruler although I encouraged them to look out the window to see if the trees actually had these straight lines and this is a situation I recognize from art lessons in Sweden. The lack of material and chances to practice on the drawing in Africa of course made a difference in the development stages of the individual child but as soon as they got the chance to practice they would develop very fast. I also was wondering if the naturalistic, realistic perspective also was the ideal image in the African culture. This was also both true and false. The children were trying very hard to draw in the “correct” perspective and they were taught perspective drawing in school, but they also had ways of telling you more about their life, culture and traditions in their drawings and they used all the ways of logical realism to do so. They were drawing the things they knew rather than the things they would actually see. The biggest differences I found were rather in the contents of the drawings or in the pictorial grammar. In my impression they would not contain so many fantasy figures like princesses or dragons, comic figures like manga or fantasy worlds like in the drawings made by western children. This could be a result from the affects of the culture, conventions and traditions surrounding the children. The children in Africa are not used to see a lot of comics on TV or play computer games which of course must make an impact on what is presented in the drawings. This supports the theories about the children being affected by things and images they see in their surroundings and how images give inspiration to new images. The local conventions like the Neolithic face, in my opinion, also support this theory. The Islamic tradition of not showing people in the drawings of course also had an impact on the pictorial grammar. Another different thing in the pictorial language that I found was the symmetric patterns in the drawings that sometimes looked almost like graphical designs. I guess this could come from the long tradition of the craft of printing on fabrics and making batik art.
Another thing that struck me as different with the African children was their confidence. All of the children said that they were very good at drawing even if this in some cases could be discussed. They seemed to be very confident in their capabilities in drawing and other areas too, and nothing appeared to be impossible as long as they set their mind to it. In my experience from schools many Swedish children claim they are very poor at drawing even if they show great talent. This puzzles me and I wonder what causes this way of thinking but I guess it also must have something to do with the culture, traditions and upbringing. I want to make my own pupils in school have that confidence and to be proud of what they have accomplished and I guess the only way of doing that is to encourage them in their work and giving them guidance and positive comments and praise.

Before coming to Africa I did not even know if art was a subject in the schools and I suspected the schools would suffer from lack of material but the situation was even worse than I had imagined. Art was a subject in the schools but the pupils would hardly have a pencil to draw with or a paper to draw upon. This lack of material will of course be a source of creativity and improvisation but it is still very hard when you don’t have any material at all. But the teachers were doing their best in school and I guess the children were learning a lot even if they did not have the chance to do so much practical work. If I look on the questions on the national exam in arts and craft for the 9th grade there are questions that even I as an arts teacher cannot answer! Still, the creativity and knowledge you can find by looking around in your local surroundings is very important especially for an arts teacher who maybe sometimes has to accept not having access to all kinds of material. I attended work-shops where we used materials, techniques and local knowledge to create art; for example sand, palm-oil, coffee, white cement and things we picked in the nature. The result was very extraordinary in the sense that it could not have been created somewhere else and this discovery was very important for me as an arts teacher. You don’t need all the different materials, techniques and things to be creative. Sometimes the creativity even can be limited if all the materials will be “served” in front of you. If I take a look in my surroundings there are a lot of material, things and techniques that can be used to make wonderful, extraordinary works of art! Maybe we need a reminder sometimes living in a western high-technology civilisation about more “down-to-earth” techniques and materials, and even more interesting and exciting; the possibility of bringing them both together – “high-tech” and “low-tech” – is an interesting challenge.
In the beginning I wrote about the purpose of my study:

“The purpose of the study is to create a wider knowledge and present the creativity and visual language of the children in West Africa. Through this, I want to create a wider intercultural perspective and understanding for children that comes from different cultures and backgrounds.”

This is without doubt the most important lesson I have learned during my time in Africa – both as a person and as a teacher. Being able to live a normal day-to-day life in a completely different culture gives you a much wider and more appreciating perspective on other cultures and traditions. One of the things that struck me is that one often searches for differences in cultures and people. But when you spend time in a completely different culture you realize that people are people everywhere, with the same joy, love, pleasures, difficulties, problems, and anger, good and bad things in the existence no matter in what culture or country you live in. Maybe one should not concentrate so much on the differences but acknowledge the similarities and in this way see the differences as a possibility and not an obstacle.
7 Literature

Stockholm: Natur och kultur.

Lund: Studentlitteratur

New York: Wiley & Sons.


Oxford: Phaidon Press.


Paris: Alcan.


Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.

Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.

Göteborg: Daidalos