

# Is a Picture Always Worth 1000 Words? Reflections from the Field

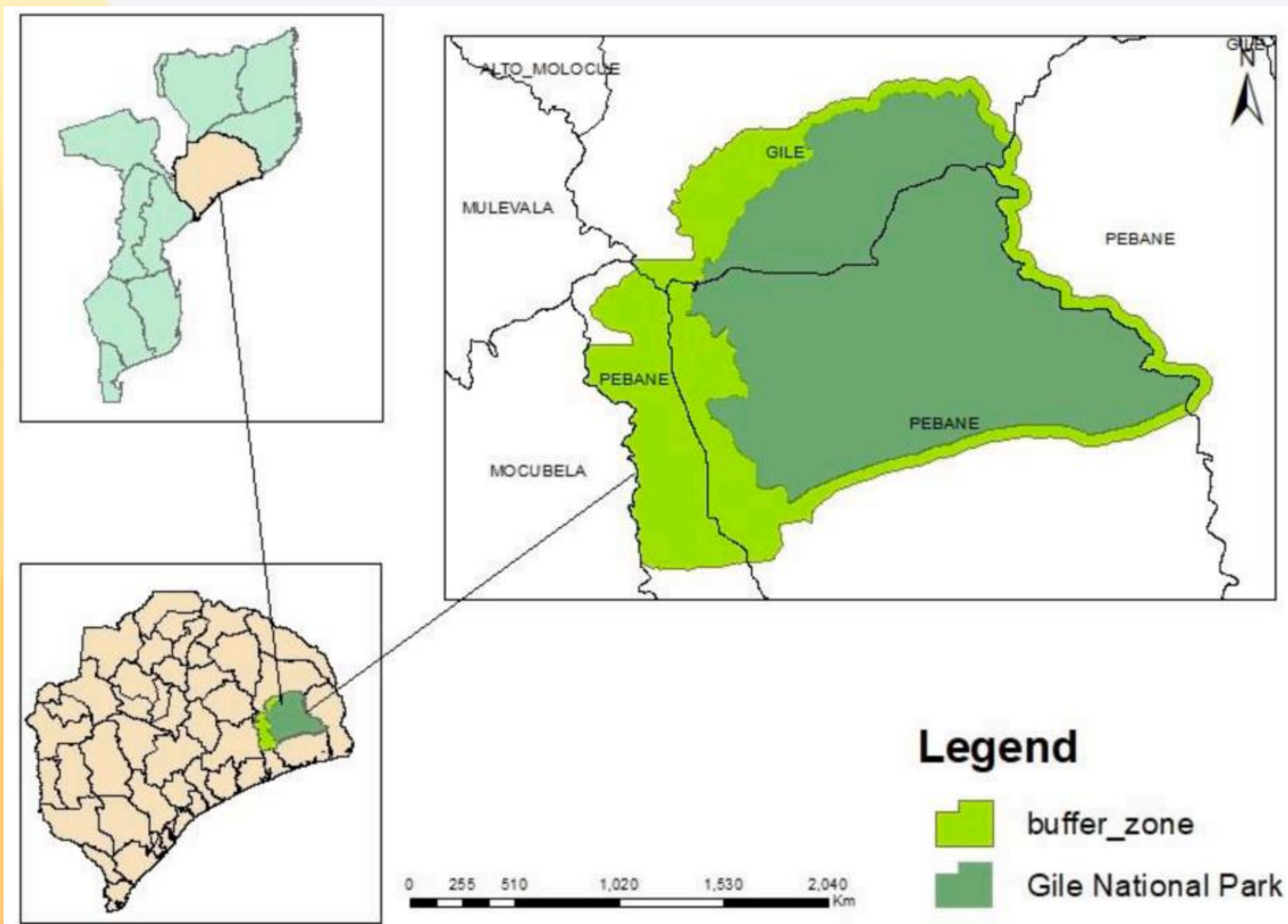
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## Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of visual methods has grown particularly within participatory research. Amongst them, Rich Pictures (RPs) have emerged as a front-runner to access tacit knowledge difficult to convey through words alone. Their potential is often highlighted for cross-cultural studies enabling researchers to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. Furthermore, pictorial approaches are believed to be especially effective when exploring spatio-temporal phenomena (Berg and Pooley, 2013). Arguably then, RPs should represent a valuable tool for investigating indigenous fire knowledge, and practices. This poster offers methodological reflections drawing on experience from ethnographic fieldwork with farming communities in Mozambique.

## Context

This research, which was part of a larger study, was conducted in Gilé National Park situated in Northeast Mozambique. The Park consists of an unoccupied protected core and inhabited buffer zone. Swidden agriculture is the dominant livelihood activity amongst the buffer zone's population of 12,000 inhabitants. Changes in landcover and habitat encroachment are consistently attributed to the practice. Meanwhile, the agricultural burning is considered a primary source of wildfire ignitions (Ameja *et al.*, 2022). For these reasons, local experts consider the practice a major threat to conservation which requires appropriate management. The overarching aim was to produce an ethnographic account of swiddening to help integrate local knowledge in future management plans.



Map of Gilé National Park's Geographical situation (reproduced from Ameja *et al.*, 2022)

## Methods

Within the wider research, RPs were used during focus groups as an elicitation technique serving as visual aids to assist participants in expressing themselves. Specifically, RPs were intended to help farmers illustrate how they organise their plots (crop patterns, sequences, and cycles) and manage their agricultural fires. The method was tested four times with groups of 6-8 participants. Participants were each given a piece of paper and a selection of pens. They were instructed to draw how they prepare and organise their plots. We explained that they were not being judged on their drawing skills and emphasised there was no single 'right' way to approach the task. Each participant was then asked to present their drawing which was followed by a group discussion using the RPs as discursive anchors.

## Practical Challenges

Young and Barrett (2000) argue the use of RPs can help engage groups with limited education. Yet, in our experience it presented a major barrier. In Mozambique, over 80% of rural residents have no formal education (Bilale 2007). Most individuals will therefore have never attended school or left prematurely. Consequently, many participants were unaccustomed to using pens and drawing took longer than anticipated. This had three direct impacts (i) Less time for interpreting the pictures (ii) Participants were tired and contributions to the discussions were limited (iii) Some participants were embarrassed and reluctant to present their pictures.



Testing Rich Pictures with a focus group in the community of Namurrua

## Conceptual Challenges

In addition to the practical challenges, various participants felt hampered by their perceived lack of artistic abilities. During the discussion, several participants explained that they made omissions from their drawings for example:

**"I didn't include cassava because I don't know how to draw it. I only included the things I knew how to draw!"**  
-Participant

Pierce (1902) distinguishes between 'icons' and 'symbols'. Icons convey meanings through a direct semblance whilst symbols are arbitrarily associated with what they denote. RPs depend on using a combination of icons and symbols. Here, the participants opted exclusively for the use of icons with an absolute absence of any symbolic representation. The development of pictorial symbolic competences depends on both the exposure and opportunity to produce symbols (Callaghan, 2020). In 'symbolically sparse communities' such as this one, participants rely predominantly on iconic representations, undermining the validity of the method as individuals are limited to literal depictions.

## Conclusion

RPs performed worse than other qualitative methods in terms of data richness and efficiency. Taken with the ethical concerns raised by eliciting negative emotions, the method was ultimately removed from the research design. My intention is not to discourage using visual methods but rather to advise to proceed with caution. RPs heavily rely on western assumptions about the of presence symbolic communication which is not necessarily universal. As such, the local context and the symbolic competences of participants warrant serious consideration before deploying this method, or indeed, any other art-based approaches.

## References

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## Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support of Gilé National Park. I am particularly grateful to Basile Guillot for his assistance and support throughout my fieldwork. I would also like to thank my research assistant Mirel Ropa for his guidance and infinite patience. Finally, my greatest gratitude remains to the communities of Buffer Zone for generously sharing their time and knowledge: *Kothamela*. Funding was provided by the University of Reading and Leverhulme Centre for Wildfire, Environment and Society.