CHILDHOOD AMONG CROCODILES: USING PLAYING AND DRAWING AS RESEARCH TOOLS OF A HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP IN BAZOULE, BURKINA FASO

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Abstract: *Stemming from a multi-species ethnographic research on the cohabitation between humans and crocodiles in village of Bazoulé, Burkina Faso, the article describes the use of play and drawing as research instruments for understanding how children see crocodiles, the precepts informally transmitted to them by adults about this animal and, ultimately, the unverbalized perception of this human community about crocodiles.*

Keywords: *Multi-species ethnography, ecosemiotics, anthropology beyond human, human animal relationships, ecology, West Africa, crocodiles, playing, drawing, visual anthropology.*
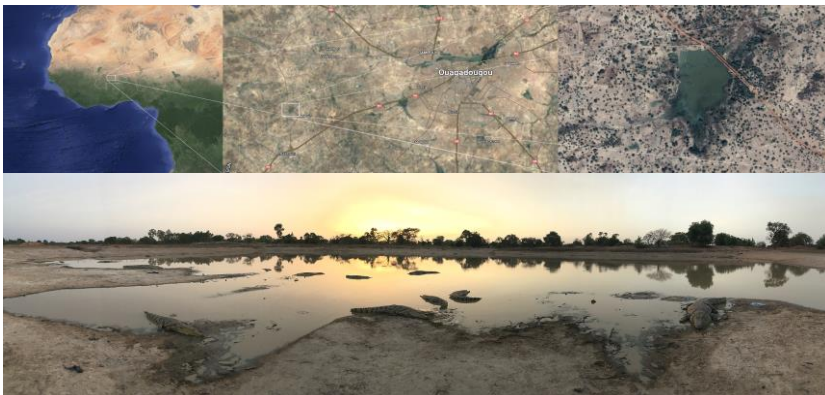
Figure 1: *(top) Google Earth sattelite pictures showing the localization of Bazoulé on world map as well as the lake in the rainy season (August). (Bottom) a panorama of the lake in the dry season (May).*

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Introduction

In the village of Bazoulé in central Burkina Faso, about 40 km southwest of the capital Ouagadougou, people and crocodiles intersect daily in the perimeter of a seasonal lake with a maximum extent of about 350-600 meters at the end of the rainy season (August) and almost dry by end of dry season (May). Animals water themselves, residents draw water for households, children play unsupervised on the shores of the lake heavily populated by crocodiles of the *crocodylus suchus* species (Ouedraogo et al., 2017). *Crocodylus suchus* is a species very similar to the Nile crocodile (*crocodylus niloticus*), so much so that it was officially differentiated only in 2003 (Schmitz et all, 2003). Between January 2016 and May 2017, 268 crocodile specimens were counted in Bazoulé, of which 25% were newborns, 17% were cubs, 12% were sub-adults and 10% were adults (Ouedraogo et al., 2017). The nearest households are less than 100 meters from the edge of the lake. Crocodiles can be found not only in the vicinity of the lake, but also at distances of hundreds of meters from it. Sometimes they enter gardens, yards or even houses. However, neither humans nor domestic animals are attacked. There is even a tourist association founded in 1996 that includes about 10 locals who act as guides. Tourists, including many children on school trips, end up taking pictures not only in the immediate vicinity of the crocodiles, but even sitting on them. The locals' explanation is that the spirits of human ancestors manifest in these crocodiles and influence their behavior towards humans. In response, people regard crocodiles as sacred, give them food offerings (live chickens), sprinkle them with water to cool them down when they arrive at households in the dry season, and even bury them at a site several hundred meters away from the lake.

This type of relationship is not unique either in West Africa or in the world. Pooley (2006) lists such human-crocodile relationships in Amani (Mali), Kachikally (Gambia), Paga (Ghana), Yamoussoukro (Côte d'Ivoire), Lake Baringo (Kenya), Lake Rukwa (Tanzania). Such relationships are also recorded in Gujarat, India[1] or in the Antankarana, Betsileo and Bara regions of Madagascar (Pooley, 2006). As for Bazoulé, it was most likely formed by a combination of several factors:

–   offering small food (chicks) to dominant crocodiles prevents hunger attacks on larger animals and humans.

–   the hydrographic isolation of the lake leads to the isolation of the crocodile population and allows the consolidation of repetitive generational patterns (the young crocodile population observes and copies[2] the behavior of mature crocodiles – who are not aggressive towards humans – in order to access the easy food source which are the chickens offered to them by humans).

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[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-46983559

[2] Crocodiles are fast learners. This includes situational recognition and adaptive behavior (researchers and hunters know that a crocodile can rarely be caught twice in the same way); using sticks and branches as tools to further camouflage; cooperative behavior to improve hunting efficiency (see for example Dinets et all, 2012; Dinets, 2013; Dinets, 2014; Dinets, 2015)

     –   artificial selection in two ways: preferentially giving food to less aggressive specimens that thus have a better chance of surviving and passing on their genetic material, and labeling exceptionally aggressive crocodiles as "foreign crocodiles" that are not populated by ancestral spirits human and as such can be exterminated.

Figure 2: *(toip) A tourist is interacting with a crocodile. (bottom) A local is feeding a crocodile with a live chicken tied to a stick. Photo credits: Adrian Câtu.*

- the protection provided to humans by the dominant crocodile specimens against the more aggressive young specimens. Dominant specimens establish their territory in the immediate vicinity of the easy food source that is humans and, through their territorial behavior, protect those from the younger and potentially more aggressive specimens.

- the mythological beliefs of the majority Mossi ethnic group starting from the idea of a creator God who withdrew from his creation and left behind a void where humans are partly responsible for restoring and preserving divine harmony (Niang, 2014).

Playing and drawing as research tools

One of the objectives of my research in Bazoulé was to understand the particular way in which the locals *perceive* the crocodile. I witnessed scenes where tourists from other areas of Burkina Faso – some of them living in areas with crocodiles and/or having had previous experiences with them – were simply terrified of approaching them and refused, almost in tears, despite the reassurances and personal example of the guides. To me, these attitudes reflected two different *perceptions* of the crocodile. By "perception" I mean here not only a mental model that apriori projects certain characteristics upon the perceived object (multi-culturalism), but more, a collection of *lived* experiences, not necessarily culturally elaborated in their entirety, and deeply embedded in the lives of the participants, so much that we can no longer speak of multi-culturalism but of multi-naturalism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). This mental model is constructed through a recursive semiotic network through which humans and non-human actors – plants, animals, objects – are constantly (re)defining each other; a network based mostly on indexical and iconic signs and only to a lesser extent on symbolic signs (Kohn, 2007; 2013).

However, in order to access "that basic level where inferences are made about the types of beings that exist and how they relate to each other" (Descola, 2014) it is necessary to go beyond the exploration of "those attributes that are distinctive to people – language, culture, society and history" (Kohn, 2013, 6). In order to understand these different "natures", we must be able to access that liminal zone where the interferences between people and the ecosystem occur – in other words, on both sides of the interface that delimits the "interiority" of people and distinguishes it from the "materiality" that surrounds it (Descola, 2014). And we cannot understand "what is distinctive to humans using methods that are distinctive to humans" (Kohn, 2013, 6.). In the study of human-animal relations, multi-species ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010) or ecosemiotics (Kohn, 2013) are already established for this purpose. In what follows, I would like to present a case study of two other research tools applied to the human-crocodile relationship in Bazoulé: play and drawing.

Beyond the intuitive meaning of "playing", Hamayon (2016, p. 31) talks about "a theoretical gap in this field". There is no clear definition of what "playing" means. Things are all the more complicated as Latin differentiates between *jocus* (joke or verbal playing) and *ludus* (playing in act) (Hamayon, 2016, 27), and English differentiates

between *game* and *play*, although both "war *games*" and "*playing* a concerto" are very serious activities – not to mention the "olympic *games*" in most languages. Playing is not even specifically human: animals learn "by playing" through an "interactive activity whose actions and signals are similar but not identical" to those of real activity (Bateson, 1987, p. 127). Playing is even attested in crocodiles (Dinets, 2015) in the form of intense locomotor activities for no apparent reason or playing with objects (including flowers). About the crocodiles of Bazoulé, the locals say that they "are amused themselves" when they twist in the water or make waves, for no apparent reason.

In order to use playing as a research tool, I do not see defining or classifying it rigorously as absolute preconditions. From the point of view of ethnography, we can consider "playing" as a human activity just like any other. But then how can it be, as I stated, a research tool "beyond human"? My argument is that play is first and foremost an iconic semiotic ecosystem: it is *something* that simulates *something else* by similitude, which is the same as saying *something* that "takes the place of *something else* for someone in terms of certain properties" (Peirce, 1990). This observation is valid for both the "play" and the "game" context. Thus, analysis of playing is ultimately an indirect analysis of how that *something* which the game is modeling is being perceived; especially those perceptions which are not just usually unverbalized, but perhaps never become verbalized.

The same argument applies equally to drawing. Originally, drawing is constructing an iconic sign of the drawn object. However, it is not a faithful reproduction: the deviations from a faithful reproduction constitute as many subsequent indexical signs that point not to the object, but to the designer. A child "will draw 'what he knows'" (Farokhi and Hashemi, 2011): his drawing will reflect the attributes he perceives as essential and often unverbalized – or unverbalizable – from his mental representation of the drawn object. The drawing also balances the situation of inferiority in which the child finds himself in verbal communication with an adult, that "communicative advantage" of the adult (Clark, 1999, p.40 apud Mitchell, 2006) while "placing images in the foreground of communication with children can lead to a clearer understanding of what they are thinking" (Wagner, 1999) – and drawing in particular can be "very effective in translating the complexity of their experience" (Nieuwenhuys, 1996:55 apud Mitchell, 2006).

Playing among the crocodiles

Countless times I observed children playing on the shores of the lake, from the smallest, who could not yet walk, to teenagers. Practically, this was an everyday fact. In general, the youngest children did not move away from their older siblings (4-5 years old), thus implicitly respecting the safety distance that the latter kept from the crocodiles, whatever that was. When it came to children who had not yet learned to walk, the older brothers would step in and occasionally move the younger ones when a crocodile changed its position and got too close. This distance varied from one child to another and from one situation to another, but in most cases it was no more than 4-5 meters. On one occasion, a boy of about 5 years accompanied me a few tens of meters on the shore, quite far from his 9-10 months brother who during all this time played in

the mud 4-5 meters from a group of crocodiles who were warming themselves in the sun. It wasn't until a crocodile came out of the water and started striding towards him that the boy went to his brother and moved him a few meters away from the crocodile's direction of travel. At no time did the boy rush or give the impression of being in any way frightened, but rather gave the impression that he was performing a formality while the object of his attention was me. As for the small child, he was clearly frightened by my Caucasian skin and not by the crocodile: on several occasions he turned his back on me, his face towards the group of crocodiles; and when his brother moved him right next to me, he showed signs of distress and began to cry, stretching out his arms to his brother to be removed from there.

Starting from 8-9 years, the safety distance of children from crocodiles is practically reduced to zero. Children begin to touch crocodiles or step on them with no other precaution than to avoid sudden movements around them, as well as not hitting them, neither on purpose nor in play. In general, children do not play in close proximity to crocodiles (1 meter or in direct contact), neither among themselves nor with crocodiles. In this particular space, movements are natural but not sudden. Even though some children were enthusiastic and ostentatious in showing me that they were not afraid of crocodiles and sat on them, this ostentatiousness was rather a reaction to my own reluctance, and it manifested itself only in their attitude towards me, not in the actual interaction with the crocodile, which was in no way theatrical or exaggerated: in close proximity to the crocodile, the children did nothing more, or differently, than they usually do.

One time I talked with the mother of two boys aged 3 and 5 respectively about how she views playing around crocodiles:

Author: "If your children told you they were going to play by the lake, how would you react? Would you tell them anything in particular?"

Mother: "No! Why?! Just don't stay there after sunset. Now that the rainy season is over and there is water in the lake, there is no problem."

Author: "Is it more dangerous at night?"

Mother: "In the dark, the crocodiles come out of the water and [children] can step on them"

Author: "What about in the dry season?"

Mother: "Then I would tell them not to go too close to the lake. When there is no water and no fish in the lake, crocodiles are nervous"

The "ignorant stranger" game

Figure 3: *(top) A teenager and a child around a crocodile (photo: Raphael Kabore). (bottom) A child interacts with a crocodile (photo source: Facebook)*

Observations of the children's spontaneous play confirmed to me that they do not pay any special attention to the crocodile. The crocodile did not appear spontaneously as an object of their games but was rather a neutral background element, similar to plants or water. The children's games did not reflect anything they might have heard from their parents about it. So I imagined another game – "of the ignorant stranger" – in which I played the role of a visitor completely unfamiliar with crocodiles and local customs while the children had to "teach" me. I have played it with great success with a group of 6 children between the ages of 6 and 12 and there are several reasons why I consider this game to be one of the best research tools I have used in Bazoule.

First of all, this game made it possible to surface in an acceptable way (and quickly overcome) the tensions which stem from the asymmetrical relationship between the children on the one hand, and the researcher on the other hand – the latter being an alien, an adult and a member of a profoundly different culture. My autoirony and willingness to play were quite effective in leveling this age asymmetry for them, and the *play setting* gave them the confidence to say and act more freely than they did when I asked them things (and when they had the impulse to adapt their answers according to my reactions, trying to please me). On the other hand, the very nature of this game entailed a cartoonishly thickened version of my own clumsy, clueless character. Thus, any attitudes, comments, or feelings the children had repressed towards me suddenly became permitted, transferred onto the character I was playing. Moreover, the self-irony and the caricature thickenings of my character made the children understand that I was also aware of many of those "oddities" that they perceived in me in relation to them, and that I accept and even share the amusement or resentment they're towards these. Thus, some attitudes, comments, or feelings about me that they would normally have censored, and thus would have implicitly remained in their attention field, suddenly became acceptable for expressing, and thus freed their attention field.

Second, this game gave the children a sense of power in relation to me. They taught me, they "piloted" me towards the crocodiles, and this also made them responsible for giving me as much information as possible. They also tested the limit: at one point, an older child, giving a disparate opinion, directed me head-on towards a crocodile, which I already knew could be interpreted by it as a sign of aggression. I then confronted the child, asking him if he was sure of what he was telling me, if this was really what he would advise an ignorant stranger. This line temporarily interrupted the convention of the game because I was suddenly asking *about* the character I was playing and not *as* this character. This interruption confronted the child with the asymmetry I was talking about earlier and forced him to recognize the limits of the game: he laughed and admitted that no, that's not what he would do – then I restarted the game without him testing this limit again.

Third, my actions during this game, to a greater extent than the questions and comments in our "serious" discussions, helped the children to understand quite precisely what those things were that I wanted to clarify. By directly observing my behaviors that seemed strange to them towards the crocodiles, the children understood to a much better extent my uncertainties and limitations as a researcher and helped to elucidate them. Thus, this game actually reversed the relationship between me and them: my actions in relation to the crocodiles, sometimes frankly naive, became the object of their research, on which they transmitted their observations and conclusions to me[1].

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[1] See also "reverse anthropology" (Kirsch, 2006; or Wagner, 1981).

What was this game actually about? On the shore of the lake, next to the crocodiles laying under the sun, I explained to the children that we were going to play a game in which I would be a foreigner who had no idea about local customs and had never seen crocodiles before, and who would start doing all kinds of things that come to his mind – and the children will have to correct him and guide him so that he learns "how" things are done. I already had a pretty clear idea of the allowed behavior towards the crocodiles and the "don'ts", but in the spirit of the game, I started by asking the children "what is that". Of course, the question amused them. "Crocodile! Animal!" came their answers. "Would it bite me?" was my next question. "No!", continued the chorus, amused. "But does it have teeth? Why doesn't it bite?" With this last question I was not successful: the children basically answered, "Because it doesn't bite". "Can I come closer?" "Yes!". At this point I told the children that "I" am going to start approaching the crocodile and they must guide me and definitely stop me if I do something dangerous. In retrospect, I would have liked not to advance myself the idea of "dangerous", so as not to introduce a possible theme that they did not have in mind; but I was concerned because I had decided to take some risk and let myself be completely "piloted" by the children, knowingly ignoring what I already knew about approaching crocodiles. So I went head-on at one of them, even though I had been warned it could interpret that as an aggression. To my relief, the kids stopped me, laughing, when I was 2-3 meters away. "Why should I stop?", I asked. They didn't explain, but they were unanimous that it wasn't a good idea to continue my approach. I then made a small detour, trying to approach from the side, but to my surprise they stopped me again. "Well, can I get close to the crocodile or not?" "Yes! No!" Here was the moment when one of them, expressing a disparate opinion, encouraged me to continue and only relented after I temporarily stepped out of the "stranger" role and confronted him. "Not to this one" another child finally explained to me. "This one is nervous." "How do you know?" They shrugged. "He's completely still, he's not doing anything, he's been here since we came.", I insisted. "How do you know he's nervous?" "Well, it moved", answered a child, surprised that I didn't see something that was obvious to them. The animal had apparently moved twice since we had been there, in the space of 20 minutes. I hadn't noticed him, but they hadn't missed these movements. "And he also has his head risen", added another child. Indeed, the crocodile's head was not resting on the ground, but was in the air, several inches from the ground. Moreover, I noticed at that moment that the body was not seated either, but slightly raised from the ground, resting on its legs and not lying on its belly. I then headed towards another one, asking from the start if he was calm ("Yes!") and how to approach him (they signaled me to continue my trajectory which naturally brought me to his side). I ended up practically glued to the crocodile, on its side, near its hind legs. My attention was focused almost exclusively on the crocodile, as this was the first time, I had done this alone: until now, there had always been an adult in close proximity, and I had relied on him for safety. I had seen how agile crocodiles were, even on land, and how they were capable of bursts of energy without any warning sign. And now I was alone with the children, on their hands. It was at this point, and for these reasons, that the game took a hilarious turn. The crocodile suddenly moved — I think maybe half a meter forward. My reaction was disproportionate: I jumped sidewise like I was burned, stepping on a puddle of water that splashed me, to the laughter of the children. From that moment they were more concerned with imitating me, laughing among themselves, than paying any attention to me. I tried to get their attention again to teach me how to ride the crocodile, but I had already lost them.

The game of "ignorant stranger" confirmed to me that in Bazoulé children are so used to crocodiles that the attention and fear of a stranger towards this animal seem to them hilarious and almost incomprehensible. They marveled that I did not perceive the signs of a crocodile's mood, that I did not recognize individual specimens, and that I was so reluctant to approach them. I interpreted the fact that one of the children tried to mislead me as an attempt to force me to admit that my naivety was fake, because he simply could not believe that it could be real. I also interpret it as a sign that they never considered me in any real danger: otherwise, their respect for adults, especially strangers or teachers (among whom they included me) would not have allowed them to put me in real danger, not even for fun. A priori, my main expectation from this game was to hear from them any advice about crocodiles that they would have heard from adults – but this did not happen. On the contrary: children often had difficulty verbalizing why I should avoid this or that action. All this indicates that the locals do not see crocodiles as a potentially dangerous animal: the children do not receive any special education related to them, but learn by observation and participation, just as with domestic animals, and what they get to know, does not get verbalized.

Ethical aspects of using a game as a research tool

The "game" is defined by a convention accepted by the participants, and which delimits it strictly contextually from the external reality. Demarcation is produced by rules and – most of the time, but not always[1] – is also spatial and temporal. A game can be defined, in fact, in general, as *a context which is strictly delimited from the outside world through convention agreed upon by participants* – a fact argued by phrases like "political *game*", "theatre *game*", "Olympic *games*", "in *play*"; or, in English, "*playing* guitar", "war *games*", "football *game*", to give just a few examples. But what happens from an ethical standpoint when this demarcation is no longer strict? This problem is conceptual in the case of the "ignorant stranger" game, because the game itself, carried out as a game in the framework agreed by the participants, produces *real* information that then transcends this space and will be used outside its context. The "ignorant stranger" not just *pretends* – within the context of this game – that he would publish an article with the information he learns from the other participants, but actually *will* publish this article in a context *outside* the game. And he would publish that information after previously telling the other participants that they will have to feed that information to *his character* as a way of *playing*. In other words, doesn't this game *manipulate* the participants regarding the limits of the game?

On closer inspection, things are a bit more nuanced. In addition to the explicit conventions on the game, there is also an implicit one: that the character of the "ignorant stranger" is not an independent "character" unrelated to the researcher, as it would be, for example, a character played by an actor – it is instead a distorted projection of the researcher himself, as we would see for example if we looked at him in a distorting mirror, or as we look at an interlocutor in a video conversation on the phone. An argument is the obvious and explicit similarity between the situation of the

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[1] Pokémon Go, for example, consisted of finding virtual characters that were located on a real map and that could be "seen" in real space, in real time, with the help of the phone's video camera. It was not, therefore, spatially and temporally delimited from the world outside of it; yet, it was delimited by the strict convention that the sought-after characters (pokémons) were virtual, without a counterpart in physical reality.

character and that of the researcher, between the curiosities that one and the other respectively have, between the ignorance of both. Another argument is that the very convention of the game *places the "ignorant stranger" in the real world*. The "ignorant stranger" is interested in the *real* lake of Bazoulé, the *real* community and the *real* crocodiles there. As such, the very convention of the game implies that any information transmitted to the "stranger" is assumed to be *real*. The question that remains is what this character does with this information outside of the context of the game. Given the transparent connection I noted above between the character and the researcher, I believe that the players do not even expect (or even want) the information they provide to be forgotten once the game ends – precisely because that the character is assumed to be a caricatured but "functional" version of the researcher. In retrospect, I wish I had explicitly discussed this with them, either by even asking them if they wanted the information to be forgotten after the game, or if they wanted the "ignorant stranger" to write an actual article which I would later bring them to read at some point...

"Draw me a crocodile"

I also asked several children to draw a crocodile in their notebooks, considering, like Farochi & Hashemi (2011), that "a child will draw 'what he knows'", namely that the attributes he perceives as essential in his mental representation about the crocodile will surface in the drawing. The interpretation of such images must avoid the trap whereby "the ethnographer turns into a visual translator who tells the viewer 'What they should see' and what the drawings 'mean'" (Myers, 1995 apud Mitchell, 2006) and is not a easy undertaking, because it must take into account the visual codes related to the socio-cultural contexts of the draftsman and the ethnographer. The absence of methodological rigor can give rise to false interpretations or circular arguments: for example, I could identify a pattern in the image only because I interpret that image in relation to a visual code that belongs to me and that is not shared by the author of the drawing who follows another visual code which I don't know, and which I try to deduce precisely on the basis of some differences which actually originate from me. To reduce these errors, I asked the children to draw "according to the model", as faithfully as possible, tso I can then evaluate the differences between the drawing and the photograph of a crocodile. All the drawings were made under the same conditions: by the lake, with the same pen and on a sheet of my notebook. To avoid spontaneous copying of patterns from one to another, the children drew without being watched by others and did not see the drawings made by others before them. The interpretation of these drawings is based on the theoretical framework outlined by Mitchell (2006), Guillemin (2004) and Rose (2016: 115-116; 128-145).

In interpreting the drawings, I was interested in aspects such as the size and positioning of the crocodile on the page; relative sizes of body parts, exaggeration or diminution of some of those; the concentration or fragmentation of the lines in certain parts, or on the contrary, the possible white spaces in its body; elements which would "humanize" the crocodile; spontaneous depiction of interactions between crocodile and human or non-human elements; and most of all similar patterns occurring in images drawn by different children. Of course, some of these deviations will always be due to the inability of the author to faithfully reproduce a real shape, but others will reflect the organization of the inner image he has of the drawn object. Moreover, the patterns

which repeatedly occur in the drawings of distinct authors are relevant to the children's collective imagination regarding the crocodile. I also tried later to discuss the particularities of the drawings with their authors, but this did not work: the children were accustomed from school to interpret any observation of an adult as criticism which they accepted without challenging his authority, and immediately tried to take the notebook and modify his drawing to "correct" the aspects I was asking him about.
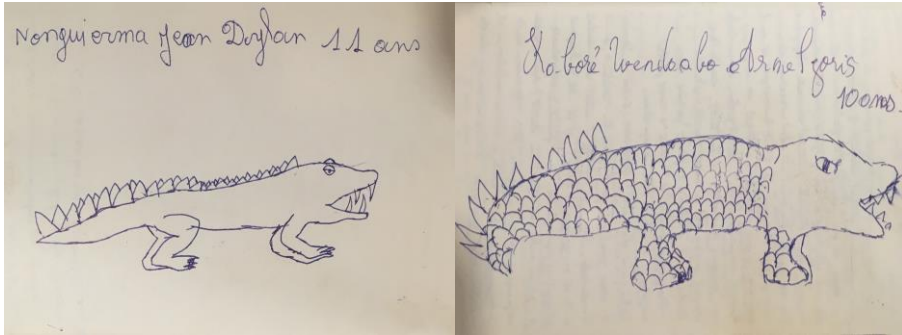

Figure 4: Drawings of crocodiles made by Bazoule children in the author's notebook. There are noticeable similarities: the slight exaggeration of the teeth balanced by a significant diminution of the mouth, which is drawn simplistically, moderately open, and much smaller than reality. The eyes are large and well-defined, in contrast to the well-camouflaged eyes of the real crocodile. The head is outlined by smooth curves, larger than its actual proportion and without scales. The legs, tail and body are represented relatively faithfully. Both children have exaggerated scales along the spine.

Figure 5: For comparison, the drawing made by an 8-year-old child from Romania, with the same tools as the children in Bazoule, using as a model a photo taken by the author. The mouth is large, with many teeth, the claws more pronounced, and the attitude, aggressive. The body is blackened, as a further expression of the danger perceived by the child.

The drawings showed remarkable similarities. The subject was generally centered and took up most of the page, with no additional elements or interactions. In general, older

children drew the crocodiles slightly smaller than the page, and younger children tended to fill the page. This may be due to the increased drawing skills of the older children, but equally to the children's perceived relationship between their body sizes and those of the crocodile. The crocodiles are depicted at the same level as the viewer, although children are normally taller than them and as such are used to seeing them from a plunging, top-down perspective. The mouth is medium open, but much smaller than, and the teeth, though slightly exaggerated in size, are diminished in number. The head is larger than life, without features or scales and drawn by smooth, non-aggressive curves. The eyes are large, clear, well-defined, in contrast to the small, camouflaged eyes of the real crocodile. The body and limbs are relatively faithfully represented, but the scales appear intermittently, except in the area along the spine, where they are rather exaggerated.

The representation of the head, mouth and teeth reflect a rather non-aggressive image of the crocodile, as an animal that children are not afraid of in any way. The teeth are slightly exaggerated in size, but placed in a much-diminished mouth, drawn on a head with completely non-aggressive shapes. The large and clear eyes of the crocodile, as well as the scaleless head appear rather as "humanizing" elements of it, indicating communication rather than intimidation. The only element that denotes a more "warlike" aspect of the animal are the scales in the dorsal area. The crocodiles are represented statically: they do not hunt, fight, swim, and the children did not spontaneously add any environmental elements (lake, swamp, other animals, or people) to their drawings. All of these aspects are consistent with the relaxation we have seen in the children around the crocodiles, and show no concerns about aggression, no fear of any of their physical or behavioral characteristics, and no sense of intimidation.

Conclusions

In Bazoulé, observing the spontaneous playing habits, playing the interactive game of the "ignorant stranger", as well as analyzing the children's drawings, dispelled the ambiguity that I still had about how people perceived crocodiles. They confirmed more than anything else the real nature of this human-animal relationship and eliminated the hypothesis it might have been just an idealizing narrative of the community. Moreover, these research methods contributed to the deconstruction of the researcher's bias: they showed that children (and by extension the adults) did not pay any special attention to the crocodile, so is such an attention had been observed to the community during the research, it was in fact only a response to the attention of the researcher himself.

When regarded as semiotic systems, playing and drawing can complement classical research methods, revealing unverbalized community perceptions of the researched object in a way unconstrained by community norms or linguistic thinking.

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