

PSC SLIDE SET NO. 1

VISUAL PERCEPTION IN THE
RURAL AREAS OF EASTERN AFRICA

Prepared by Phil Vincent
April, 1974

UNICEF - Slide Set

Visual Perception in East Africa

1. Mrs. Kilele Posters and simple illustrations have been used in rural East Africa for many years to promote the aims of the administration of the time.

2. Health Assistant From the earliest examples we can find the best illustrations of the way not to succeed in communicating with the audience. A poster may try to help introduce the local Health Assistant, but to say 'This is your friend' is not as simple as it sounds. Those who saw such a poster simply did not believe that the unknown face was a friend, for they had never seen him before. Add to this the strange clothes, like a police uniform, and the huts in the background which are not common in the region, and one can see how few people will get the message.

3. Flying Doctor A series of research and evaluation programmes have been carried out by the African Medical and Research Foundation based in Nairobi. This organisation is better known as the Flying Doctor.

 Pursuing the notion that our idea of what others see may not be accurate, a series of tests were conducted in rural areas of Eastern Africa, using both simple line drawings and some examples of more recent posters and illustrations.

4. Cow The simple line drawing seems like a pretty safe bet for illustrating a simple theme. A cow was recognised by 90% of those questioned.

5. Goat

But a goat, drawn in a similar style was interpreted as a cow as well. Most people said that the only animal on the farm with a tail which goes downwards is a cow.

6. Table

In fact, the tail was sufficient to convince them it was not a goat and so they attempted to identify the drawing through some other isolated detail. Suggestions ranged from a cow to a man or even a bird. A drawing of a tortoise, a common animal in Kenya, was shown to rural people. The detail drawn on the shell was apparently so confusing that some looked at the head and said it was a snake under a rock, and others saw the feet and said that

7. Hoe

it was an elephant. A single detail can rule out the obvious and suggestions as to the subject of the drawing can be most surprising. A hoe, with a notch drawn on the blade was described by one group as a man walking upside-down along a road. The Vee mark in the blade became the neck of a man's shirt

8. Man on Road

and the blade itself his shirt and his head. An attempt has been made here to stress the lines necessary to develop this interpretation.

9. Huts

A favourite method of producing a more realistic image is the use of perspective and oblique points of view. This is, however, an artistic device and depends on a high degree of perceptual sophistication. Three huts, each one drawn as if it were a little further from the

observer than the last, are supposed to all be the same size. In rural areas many saw the largest hut as the living quarters, and next to it the kitchen and lastly the pit latrine, since this is the actual size relationship in their locality.

10. Hunting scene A hunting scene was tested in Kenya in two forms. Do converging lines give the clue that the man is trying to spear the buck? Among local children, who had up to 12 years schooling, the unanimous conclusion was that the man was trying to spear the
11. Hunting scene elephant. A similar situation was shown to them with a more natural background. The conclusion of the youngsters was the same. From the older villagers, however, there was a different response. The man is hunting the buck, they said. Why? Well, everyone who has been hunting or poaching knows well that you cannot hunt an elephant with a spear in that position!
12. Cupboard Combine both a detailed line drawing and one with perspective. Rural and urban people interpreted a cupboard as many things, from books lying on a
13. Classroom table, to a classroom with benches on it.
14. Fly Health posters often resort to enlargements of organisms and to close-ups of various parts of the body. A fly drawn on a card, eight inches by ten inches, was far larger than any insect that anyone
15. Fly table had seen. They tried to find possible alternatives which more closely matched the size of the drawing.

The suggestions are not as ludicrous as they might appear at first sight. To rural people they are all much more likely than an insect eight inches long.

16. Hand Dismembered hands and feet are sometimes used to illustrate many health messages, but generally the reaction in the villages was that hands and feet cannot exist on their own and the whole concept appears impossible. Thus, any written message that goes with it is likely to appear nonsensical.
17. Foot
18. Open hut An obvious misunderstanding of "literal perception" is the use of sections to reveal the structures hidden from normal view. If things are normally hidden from sight, how can one expect anybody to recognise the drawing? A section of a well is more rationally interpreted as a tumbler of water or even a gallows: and such were the responses from rural people in Tanzania where this poster was distributed. The lower half was also confusing to many people. Generally, the feeling was that the woman was walking to her house perched in the branch of the tree since she was afraid of the herd of fierce buffalo at the foot of the tree.
19. Well
20. Pit latrine Promotion of pit latrines was attempted in the Kisii district of Kenya by showing a partial section of the latrine hut and adding the message that: "civilized people should use a latrine and

not go to the bushes". The poster was withdrawn hastily when researchers discovered that many people were insulted by the suggestion that they should use a latrine in which they could be seen.

21. Section of head

The St. John's Ambulance organization in East Africa started a drive to increase general knowledge of first aid by releasing a book which was first published in England. A few examples of the illustrations from the book show how little thought was given to the target audience. A section of a head, to show the position of the tongue and the wind-pipe, was without any meaning even to urban people.

22. Man on gate

A drawing of how a man slips on a gate and breaks his ribs was interpreted as someone chasing a dog or trying to beat him. The farm in the background is not typical of anything you are likely to find in Africa.

23. Child

Finally, a boy is stung by nettles as he tries to retrieve his ball. To rural people, the ball became the head of a snake which had bitten him, or his tears became a swarm of bees on his face. This may seem like an elementary error, but it is not all

24. Clean dishes

that uncommon. FAO produced a handbook for use in Africa in which they showed the advantages of hygiene in the home. On the left the pile of dishes are surrounded by flies. The picture on the right was supposed to show the advantage of

washing them straight away and the dishes are so clean that they sparkle. This might appear to be the case to most people in the city, but in the villages the flies were still swarming around those clean dishes.

25. Nutrition
Poster (1)

Analogies are a convenient way for people to visualise concepts. The house should symbolise building foods and the padlock protective foods to those of us who have mastered non-literal thought. In the rural areas the house is no more than a house and one cannot assume that it will have any further significance. A poster which says, 'Take one food from each group at each meal' was tested only after some of the nutrition workers realised that their audiences were consistently asking questions such as, 'Do you mean that we have to slaughter a cow at each meal?' or, 'Should the padlock be boiled or roasted?' The testing confirmed that the majority of the people misunderstood many parts of the poster. It was withdrawn and an alternative

26. Nutrition
Poster (2)

issued using blocked colour photographs and dropping the analogies. This poster was well understood by youngsters who had only three years of primary school.

27. Vaccination
Photo

Using a photograph, whether or not the background has been blocked out, will not guarantee that the image will be understood. Photographs are now to be found in the smaller villages in East Africa, but mostly as family portraits or groups. A photograph showing a child receiving oral polio vaccine puzzled

- most rural people since they had never seen a picture of a child with his mouth in such a contorted position. Nor did the majority see that there are two men at work in this picture. No one in the rural, or even urban, areas spends money on a photograph of his behind.
28. Two men photo
29. Meat soup
30. Baby drawing
31. Clean hotel
32. Picture Book
- Equally surprising have been the positive findings of this research. A simple poster with a drawing of bones and the message 'Meat Soup' was apparently clear to all: 'You are supposed to boil the bones to make the soup', they said. A local artist's rendering of a baby might not seem the height of verisimilitude, but in rural areas the identification was positive: apparently because the teeth were those of a young child. A clean hotel painted, with complete absence of perspective, by a local artist, was supposed to encourage people to eat only in clean places. Those who were questioned did not observe anything amiss in the rendering and understood that they were looking at a picture of an eating place and that it was clean.
- We sometimes forget that most of us were brought up with picture books of some sort, and that the people we are trying to reach never saw anything other than real objects while they were forming their ideas about the world around them.

We might look at the same thing as they do,
but what we see is an entirely different matter.

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Notes

Discussed during Part III of the workshop, "Media in PSC campaigns".

About how rural people in African villages understood various posters trying to convey a message.

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