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String figures



The art of string figures in Papua New Guinea

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Anmerkung der Redaktion:

Das hier vorliegende Dossier enthält einen Artikel aus dem Rundbrief Nr. 97, September 2014 in vollständiger Länge. Die Sprache des Dossiers ist englisch.

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The art of string figures in Papua New Guinea

Take a length of string, let's say one and a half meters, and tie the ends together. You thus obtain an endless string. Take up this string on your hands, and you now hold sheer endless possibilities. Allow your fingers to weave and manipulate the string, and just use your imagination to create figures representing things, animals, plants, people, or abstract symmetrical patterns. You now participate in an ancient activity connecting you with all mankind. This is **the art of string figures**.

The origins of string figure making are unclear, but it is likely that string figures belong to prehistoric times and developed alongside the evolution of plaiting and weaving techniques. Unfortunately proof of this is lacking due to the dominant characteristic of string figures: they exist as long as they are held on the hands, but disappear when taken off the hands. Then only a piece of string remains, which is subject to rapid decay and thus leaving no archaeological trace. Furthermore there are no ancient written accounts of string figures. String figure making especially flourishes in cultures that use no written records. In literate societies string figure making was confined to the domain of amusement or play, not taken sufficiently serious to write about it or to record it. And if, exceptionally, one was willing to record it, the difficulty of how to unambiguously describe the complex movements of the fingers formed an indomitable barrier. Perhaps the same reasons (its volatile nature and its status as "mere" play) caused the lack of pictorial accounts. The oldest undisputed accounts of string figure making stem from the 17th century (Saito 2001; Probert 2011).

The fact that string figures are found all over the world suggests their antiquity. They have been reported from the Arctic, the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe and the Pacific. In Europe, and also in Germany, string figure making is nowadays considered a children's game, but a few traces of complex string figures (too difficult for children to make) remain, suggesting that in the past it was not only for children (Claassen 2010).

In the Pacific region string figures are current, and they have been found on (almost) every island. In many places they are now a thing of the past and not a living tradition anymore. The conditions under which they were originally made have changed due to changes in society, and they have had to compete with other amusements and ways of spending time. But in some places string figure making still is practiced regularly, for example on the Trobriand Islands, on the islands of the Torres Strait and on Vanuatu.

String figure making has been reported from all over the island of New Guinea, although records from the western half are relatively scarce. Although there are accounts of string figure making in particular contexts, such as mourning for a deceased person (Held 1957:182), large scale string figure making at meetings of youngsters that can lead to marriages (Schoorl 1979:114-115) and fertility magic (Höltker 1942-1943/2010), the main context in which string figures are

and were made appears to be that of leisure time, play and fun. The sole function of the string figures is then to enjoy making them, alone or together with others. Often the figures can be transformed into other figures, or have a particular action to go along with them. And several of them are accompanied by small verses or songs, as a rule explaining their form and action. The objects and actions represented vary widely. String figures can represent all kinds of animals, plants, people (in general, or particular people), heavenly bodies (moon, sun, stars), objects and tools from daily life (knife, spear, cooking equipment), and actions (i.e. hunting, cooking, cleaning food, catching lice). Often there is a striking similarity between the string figure and what it represents, even in the eyes of the Westerner. But there are also many examples where this is not so apparent.

Fig. 1. Ngabosis, "Butterfly", a Wampar string figure.



Let's have a look at an actual string figure. The Wampar in the Morobe Province in Papua New Guinea (PNG) make a figure called *ngabosis* (fig. 1). It does not take much imagination to see a butterfly in it; its body is represented by the two triangles in the center, and its wings are the side-loops that are held by the hands. But it can also be the sun, *su* ("sun") being its alternative name ((Fischer 2012:27 & 35). It could then be that the side-loops represent its rays. In the PNG highlands people make the same figure and call it a frog, the side-loops being its legs (Noble 1979:158). And, doesn't the figure also look somewhat like an almond? As such it is found on the Solomon Islands (Maude 1978:115).



Fig. 2. Cup and Saucer or Teetasse.

Now let us attempt to make an actual action string figure from PNG (Noble & Claassen 2012:156-158), which was recorded in the North Fly District. The figure is called Two Men Fighting. Its construction starts from the well-known European string figure Cup And Saucer, in Germany also known as the Teetasse (fig. 2). Make this figure with a loop of string. If you have forgotten how to do this, Hilgemeier's written instructions check Mario on the internet (www.hilgemeier.gmxhome.de/fadenspiele/tasse tee.htm) or watch the video Youtube clip on the channel of Moms Minivan (www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AtT-pioprk).



Fig. 3. Inserting the index fingers in the thumb loop while making Two Men Fighting.

Now, while holding the figure, turn your hands until the palms of the hands face each other and the fingers point upwards. Bring your index fingers, holding their loop, towards you from above in the thumb loop (fig. 3) and transfer the thumb loop to the index fingers; return the index fingers. You now hold the basic figure of Two Men Fighting (fig. 4). The points where two strings intertwine, indicated by arrows in the figure, represent, in an abstract way, two people.



Fig. 4. Basic figure of Two Men Fighting.

Well, the figure is not static! It is possible to apply some action, and to actually witness the fight of the two men. Consider the two loops on each index finger. There is an upper index loop, being closest to the tip of the finger, and a lower

index loop, being closest to the base of the finger. We will be working on the lower loop on each index finger only. It has a near string, closest to your body, and a far string, farthest away from your body.

We're going to make the men fight. To do this, grasp the far string of the lower index loop between thumbs and middle fingers, and then, with small draws, push each string towards the center of the figure (fig. 5). You will see that the two men move towards each other in the center of the figure until they are close enough to fight.



Fig. 5. Two Men Fighting: Making the two men meet to fight.

With some fantasy it is possible to stage a complete fight and tell a story along with it. In the end, when the men get tired, they leave the fighting ground and return to their homes. To achieve this, this time grasp the *near* string of the lower index loop between thumbs and middle fingers, and then, with small draws, push each string towards the center of the figure (fig. 6).

The figure appears to be known only on the New Guinean Island. Making it from the Cup and Saucer/Teetasse figure is unique; usually it is made in a slightly different way. If you don't like the violent interpretation of the figure, then let it be a boy and a girl meeting to kiss or to do other things that couples use to do.

The two figures discussed above are only a tiny sample of the wealth of traditional string figure material that is available. One can spend a lifetime learning, studying and enjoying it. Now what is the fun of string figures? Of course this is a matter of taste, but the following elements could contribute to the fun. String figures are (almost) immaterial; one does not need expensive materials, only a piece of string rope, which one can take along easily. String figures connect you with people all over the world; you get into contact with other cultures and ways of life. There is joy in sharing and exchanging string figures with others, and in using your creativity to invent new figures of your own. And there is joy in applying your memory and your dexterity, and in realizing that you get more and more fluent in making string figures. Of course there's also the awe and satisfaction when a figure finally, after a lot of difficult movements, appears on your hands, or when the trick actually works.



Fig. 6. Two Men Fighting: Having the men retreat.

The International String Figure Association (www.isfa.org) connects people around the globe who are enthusiastic about string figures. It was founded in 1978 by Dr. Hiroshi Noguchi, a Japanese mathematician, and Rev. Philip Noble, an Anglican missionary stationed in Papua New Guinea. It is dedicated to the gathering and distribution of string figure knowledge around the world. Interested readers are invited to visit the website. Amongst many other things, it presents a monthly string figure (traditional or newly designed) and allows you to make it from written instructions and video clips.

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