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Source: *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 36
(Jan. - Jun., 1906), pp. 142-149

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1193251>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 11:02

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STRING FIGURES FROM SOUTH AFRICA.

BY A. C. HADDON, SC.D., F.R.S.

SOME years ago I knew of the occurrence of a string trick in Uganda which is the same as that now published by Dr. Cunningham. At the Universal Exposition at St. Louis, 1904, Mrs. Jayne learnt one figure from a Batwa Pygmy from the Congo Kasai Valley (*cf.* C. F. Jayne, *String Figures; a Study of Cat's Cradle in Many Lands*. New York: C. Scribner and Sons, 1906, p. 267) while at the same time Dr. Cunningham was collecting numerous examples in East Africa. In the same book Mrs. Jayne records that Dr. W. H. Furness found "The Leashing of Lochiel's Dogs" (*Man*, 1903, p. 117) among the Kabyles of Algeria, introduced from France under the name of "Cock's Feet" (p. 116), and real "Cat's Cradle" among some little Arab girls in Algiers who had learned it in a French school. I took the opportunity of the visit to South Africa of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in August and September, 1905, to see how far this amusement was known to the natives. Not a single white person to whom I mentioned the subject had seen or heard of the game amongst the natives, and although I tried numerous natives of the British Colonies south of Rhodesia, I could not find one who could do anything with a piece of string. It would be rash to conclude that string figures do not occur among these tribes, but I think they must be rare, especially in the case of the Zulu peoples. I append, however, one Zulu example, and there is evidence that others are known. I may add that I was aided in my search by several friends to whom I had taught many figures and tricks on the outward voyage; of these Professor W. M. Davis, of Harvard University, was most assiduous and successful in his inquiries among the natives, and I am indebted to him for the three figures which conclude this paper, and Miss May E. Swan succeeded in obtaining the first recorded Zulu example. In October, 1905, Mr. Parkinson collected the first specimens of string figures from West Africa, and later he obtained the others that are here published (*supra*, p. 132). My friend Mr. Dudley Kidd has permitted me to take the following account from his book, *Savage Childhood* (p. 176), published by A. and C. Black.

"In many districts the children play 'Cat's Cradle' in exactly the same way that we do. Mr. Hawkins, of Zululand, assures me the children in his district play cat's cradle in almost exactly the same way as English boys; the game is also played in Basutoland. The natives call the game *Uzamanyeka*, which means 'It sways of itself.' In Basutoland the favourite modification gives to the game the name of 'Fowl's Foot,' because the foundation pattern of the string looks like the foot of a hen. Unfortunately, I have been unable to get details of this

modification. When the children are tired of playing this game they modify it thus: two boys lie down on the ground with feet to feet; a third boy takes a piece of string and loops it round the toes of the two boys in an intricate tangle. The boys have to release their toes without touching the string with their hands.

“Another string trick often practised by the boys is as follows: A boy takes a piece of string about two yards long, and joins the free ends to form a loop. He places this loop round his head and his two hands which are held out in front of his face. A string circle is thus formed which touches his head and the backs of his two hands. The string is steadied by being hitched half round the thumbs after it passes over the backs of the hands. The boy holding the string taut then moves his left hand in front of his open mouth, passes the string through the mouth and loops it under the chin. He then moves his left hand, still carrying the string, away to the left side. A similar operation is performed with the right hand, and the string in front of his face is made taut. When this is accomplished the boy passes the loop of string which is in front of his face over the back of his head, claps his hands and quickly withdraws them with the string entirely free from his mouth and chin, and also free from the head, which is disengaged from the loop by the manœuvre. This trick is the most elaborate one I have met with amongst the Kaffirs, and is by no means easy to describe lucidly in a few words.”

So far as I am aware this completes all the records from Africa of this game.

1. MA-ROSE. Batoka Gorge of the Zambezi River.

Suspend the string on the right wrist so that two equal loops depend from its radial and ulnar sides.

Pass the left hand through both loops and place hands in the usual position.

Pick up on the radial side of the little fingers the two strings which cross each other in the centre of the figure.

Draw hands apart with palms uppermost, then half turn the hands so that the thumbs are uppermost.

With a swinging movement throw the radial wrist string away from you over both hands and draw hands apart.

With the back of each thumb pick up the corresponding oblique radial little finger string.

Pass the ulnar wrist string to radial

FIG. 1.—Zambezi River.

FIG. 1A.—Zambezi River.

side of wrist. This is accomplished by closing together the thumb and fingers of each hand and by passing the tips of the digits distal to the two ulnar little finger strings and then, by bringing them towards you distal to the ulnar wrist string, allow that string to slip over the hands.

Extend the figure by separating the thumbs and little fingers. (Figs. 1 and 2.)

The simple zigzag line thus produced represents the remarkable Batoka Gorge of the Zambezi River below the Victoria Falls. This is one of the very few geographical string figures known to me, and I was particularly pleased to learn it from a native at the very spot it illustrated. My informant called it Zambezi River.

2. *Makora*, a canoe.

Opening A.

Transfer right index loop to left index and the original left index loop to the right index over the one just transferred.

The centre of the figure represents the canoe.

This figure is precisely the same as one from Torres Straits, where it is known as "Throwing the Fish-spear," but in the latter case there is a movement connected with it by releasing either index loop (Jayne, *l.c.*, p. 131). A similar figure is illustrated by Dr. W. Roth from North Queensland (*North Queensland Ethnography*, Bulletin No. 4, March, 1902, Plate V; copied in Jayne, *l.c.*, p. 378), where it is known as "The Flying Duck." I lay no stress on the distribution of this figure as its formation is so extremely simple.

3. *Inyoni*, a little bird.

Suspend the string over a peg, someone else's finger, or other object, so that one short loop and one long loop depend.

Pass the long loop through the short loop in such a manner that a new short loop is produced.

Continue the process indefinitely.

Smartly pull the tag end of the original long loop and all immediately runs out.

This trick was taught to me by a Ma-Rotse boy immediately after I had shown him the somewhat analogous *Kebe Mokeis*, "mouse" trick, from Torres Straits.

BA-TOKA.

4. *Kanyandi*, fish trap.

Opening A, with middle finger.

Release little fingers.

Pass little fingers distal to middle finger loops and take up the ulnar thumb strings.

Take off right middle finger loop and pass it right round and beneath the palmar string within its own loop, and keep hold of this loop and of the centre of the palmar string.

Release thumb and little fingers.

Still holding the two loops place the outer one (the original middle finger loop) over the index and remaining fingers of the right hand and the inner one (the original palmar string) over the right index.

FIG. 2.—*Kanyandi*, fish trap.

Do the same with the left hand.

Extend the figure by passing middle

fingers distal to ulnar index string and taking up the radial index string with the back of the middle fingers.

The *Kanyandi* is a kind of open screen made of reeds fastened by bark lashing; this is placed across the mouth of streams, and the people frighten the fish into these traps, the fish being entangled by their gills. This figure was taught to me by a Mu-Toka boy. *Kanyandi* is a Ba-Toka word.

It is very interesting to find that the figure called by Mrs. Jayne "The Pigmy Diamonds" (*l.c.*, p. 276), which she obtained from a so-called pygmy from the Congo Kasai Valley, is similar in result to this figure but reversed, and the mode of formation is different. This figure has an opening figure which consists of a straight string between the thumbs and one between the wrists and two strings which cross each other between these. A similar opening figure, arrived at in a somewhat different manner, has been described by Cunningham under the name of "Sumbo," or fishing net, from the southern end of Lake Tanganika. The opening figure of the Zambezi River figure is similar, except that in the latter the wrists support all the strings; at all events an opening with two straight strings and one central cross is characteristic of several African figures.

5. *Amadande*.

Opening A.

Release thumbs.

Pass thumbs proximal to index and little finger loops and take up ulnar little finger strings on dorsal aspect of thumbs.

Release little fingers.

Pass thumbs distal to radial index string and take up with back of thumbs the ulnar index string.

Pass little fingers distal to radial index string and take up ulnar thumb string from proximal side.

Release thumbs.

Pass thumbs distal to index finger loops and take up the radial little finger strings from proximal side.

Insert thumbs from proximal side into index finger loops between the finger and the palmar string.

Transfer proximal, or original, thumb loop over tip of thumb to its palmar aspect; this can be readily effected by slipping the thumb distally between the two radial thumb strings.

There is now a triangle on the palmar aspect of each thumb. Place each index into its thumb-triangle from the distal side.

Release little fingers and extend the figure by separating the thumbs and indices.

This figure was called *amadande*, but we could not be certain whether this was the general name for string figures of this particular form. It is known to the Ba-Rotse as *Latua*. This figure, which may be called "The East African Fish Trap," is widely spread. I found it was known by the Senna at Umtali, and it has been recorded from three places by Cunningham (*supra*, p. 124) although the method of making it varies somewhat. It crops up again as "The Calabash Net" in Lagos, West Africa (Parkinson, *supra*, p. 132). It is interesting to find that the same figure made in the African manner is recorded by Mrs. Jayne (*l.c.*, p. 24) from Osage Indians of Oklahoma, North America; she points out that in the Philadelphia Free Museum of Science and Art there are two finished patterns of this figure attached to cardboard under different names from the Hawaiian Islands; but we do not know how these are formed.

Strangely enough Mrs. Jayne records an abbreviated variety of the pattern from the Osage Indians (*l.c.*, p. 28) in which the string is doubled, but used throughout as if it were a single string, the resultant pattern being somewhat more simple. She refers to a Hawaiian example of this figure (done with a single string) in the same museum.

I was much interested to find at Umtali that a double string was occasionally used to make the *amadande* figure.

In Rhodesia I also saw precisely the same trick described by Cunningham from Yao, Shiré Highlands, which consists of twisting a string round the neck, and then by pulling one string the whole runs free. This is also known in Uganda.

It is worth noting that a similar trick occurs among the Philippinos of the Linas Moro and among the Negrito tribes (*vide* Mrs. Jayne, *l.c.*, 339), and Dr. W. H. Furness found it in the Caroline Islands, but in this instance the third movement consists of making opening A instead of a simple loop, but the movement ensures precisely the same end.

PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA.

6. Fighting Lions.

This and the following figures were obtained by Professor W. M. Davis from a boy at Bulawayo, who learned them from his mother at Beira.

Take up a small portion of the string between the thumb and index of each hand and bring the left hand counter-clockwise so as to form a loop, in which insert the left index in such a way that the two strings lie on it an inch apart. Put right index into these loops in same direction and draw hands apart, fingers pointing away from the body. There is now a double loop of parallel strings on the radial side of each index and crossed strings on their ulnar side, the proximal ulnar string of the right hand crossing over (radial to) the proximal ulnar string of the left hand.

Catch the middle of all the strings under the chin and bring the hands together.

Transfer left distal index loop through right distal loop to right index, and right distal loop outside of left distal loop to left index.

Pass thumbs over proximal radial index string and under proximal ulnar index string and over distal radial index string and under distal ulnar index string.

Raise proximal radial index string of each hand from palm over (that is, radial) distal radial index string and lay it over little finger.

Raise distal radial index string of each hand from middle of palm and lay it round index from the radial to back and to ulnar side.

FIG. 3.—Fighting lions.

Release chin.

Stretch distal ulnar index string and ulnar little finger string until they are parallel between the hands, and release thumbs.

With thumbs raise the double loops that were on the thumbs and so pull the zigzag loops (lions) on the parallel cross strings to bring the parallel strings closer together; then stretch the cross string parallel again. (Figs. 3 and 3A.)

FIG. 3A.—Fighting lions.

Say "Oo-ah" while doing this (= the lions roaring).

7. Bird.

Position 1.

Carry right hand away from you round left ulnar string and up into the loop. Do the same with left hand and right ulnar string.

Extend figure.

Repeat the double process again.

Pick up left palmar string with right index and *vice versa*.

Pass each distal dorsal string of its own hand on to the palmar surface.

Place each proximal dorsal wrist string on to thumbs only.

Insert indices into thumb loops from distal side and with back of indices take up straight radial thumb string, leaving one loop on each thumb.

Extend straight ulnar index string with middle and ring fingers and stretch ulnar thumb string with thumb (that is, change it to the radial side of the thumb).

Extend figure.

To release take front and back cross strings in the mouth, release fingers and spread the hands.

8. *Ambra*.

Place the loop over the three middle fingers of each hand.

Release the loop from the backs of the hands, letting it fall over the whole hand on the palmar side.

Place the entire right hand upwards through the left palmar string and *vice versa*.

FIG. 4.—*Ambra*.

Draw tight.

With the left thumb and index hold the two middle right hand strings firmly and somewhat apart and take right hand finger loops entirely off right hand. Give the right hand one twist away from you and replace finger loops in former positions.

Repeat with the left hand strings.

Lay the outer thumb and little finger strings of each hand over the backs of the hands.

Twist each thumb and little finger string once round its own digit.

Remove each wrist string to the palmar side of the hand, letting it fall on to thumb and little finger (*i.e.*, position 1).

Plunge each whole hand from above through the triple triangular space nearest to it and extend, saying at the same time "*Ambra!*"

NATAL.

9. *Isefuba S'encala*.

This string figure was obtained by Miss May E. Swan from a Natal Zulu girl named Carché, who belongs to the kraal of Funoi, an old induna living on a farm of Aanhouwen near Vryheid. Carché showed Miss Swan another figure

which seemed to represent ears; the other girls said they did not know any, but showed Miss Swan some plaiting.

Use string double.

Opening A.

Let go thumbs.

Thumbs take up nearer strings from little fingers.

Let go little fingers.

Thumbs take up nearer strings from first fingers.

Pass lower thumb strings over upper ones.

Put first fingers downwards into loops formed between forefinger and thumb strings.

Extend and put up to face as spectacles.