Some Nigerian String Figures

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Part I.

IT is now just thirty years since the first string figures from Africa were described. A statement like this calls for some explanation, for what are string figures? It is well known that among primitive peoples there are countless interesting customs and pursuits, and that even the games played by children have frequently a scientific value. Amongst the most common of all games is the making of patterns by the weaving with the fingers of a simple loop of string placed over the hands—in other words, the game of "Cat's Cradle."

This game has a world-wide distribution: first described from the Eskimo in 1888, it was not until ten years later that much attention was paid to it. During the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits the first comprehensive collection of string games was made, and Drs. W. H. R. Rivers and A. C. Haddon devised a nomenclature by which they could be written down. This, really, was the start of the scientific study of these games, and from this small beginning it has grown into a recognised branch of Ethnology.

This is, perhaps, hardly the place to enter into a general account of the distribution and social significance of string figures. Those interested will find this dealt with fairly fully in a book published a few years ago,* and it must here suffice to say that they have now been recorded from primitive tribes all over the world. The more civilised peoples appear to have few or none; whether they have had them and lost the art, or whether they themselves did not invent any, but learnt a few from other peoples, is unknown. But primitive man, whether in the South Sea Islands, in Arctic lands, in tropical South America, North America, or in the great continent of Africa, fairly revels in them.

Africa is so vast that one can merely mention the places where collections have been made before turning to the Nigerian examples with which we are here concerned. The first were described by Dr. W. A. Cunnington in 1904 from Central Africa, followed by a few from South Africa collected by Dr. A. C. Haddon and some more from Yoruba Land by Mr. John Parkinson; here the matter rested for some years. Subsequent collections have been made in the following chronological order: Tanganyika (Kraus), Congo (Starr), Gold Coast (Griffith), Sierra Leone (Hornell), and Portuguese East Africa (Earthy). This does not indicate, by any means, that these are all the places where string figures may be found in Africa; on the contrary, the sporadic nature of these collections points to gaps in our knowledge rather than in their distribution. Wherefore we might appeal to anyone interested to further our knowledge of the subject by collecting string figures wherever and whenever possible, being careful to record the exact locality.

* "Artists in String," by Kathleen Haddon (Methuen & Co., 1930).

The Nigerian figures which follow were all collected by Mrs. Treleaven, and show some affinity to those previously described from Africa, and especially, as might be expected, to the other West African figures. The first figure, "A Drum," is one that, in its final stage, has an almost world-wide distribution, although it is made differently in different countries. It is known in North America, Alaska, Australia, and the British Isles, as well as in Central Africa.

No. 7, "The Bridge," has a distribution even more puzzling, as it is a moderately complicated figure, whereas the "Drum" is a very simple one. Moreover the method of procedure in making the "Bridge" is exactly the same whether it be done by Osage Indians of Oklahoma, Blackfeet in British Columbia, or by natives of Hawaii, East or West Africa. With such a wide occurrence one cannot say that this figure has been passed from one people to another; it must have been evolved separately, but why it should crop up again and again cannot at present be explained. Indeed the whole problem of distribution remains unsolved, and it is only by the collection of more, and yet more, data, that we can hope to find some solution.

Nomenclature

The nomenclature adopted in describing the following figures is the one invented by Drs. Rivers and Haddon, and fully described in "Cat's Cradles".* In as far as it is necessary to the making of the Nigerian Figures which follow, the method must be described.

1. A string passed over a digit is called a loop, and consists of two strings; that on the thumb side is the radial string, that on the little finger side is the ulnar string.
2. A string across the front of the hand is a palmar string, one lying across the back of the hand is a dorsal string.
3. If there are two loops on a digit, the one nearest the hand is "proximal," that nearest the tip of the digit is "distal." Thus also a digit may be inserted into a loop from below, *i.e.*, the proximal side, or from above, *i.e.*, the distal side.
4. When there are two loops on a digit it is sometimes necessary to lift the proximal loop over the distal one, and over the tip of the digit on to its palmar aspect. This is referred to as "Navahoing," on account of its frequent occurrence among the string figures of the Navaho Indians of New Mexico, U.S.A.
5. It is sometimes necessary to twist a loop; this may be done in a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction.
6. There are certain opening positions, and movements which are common to many figures, and for these the terms Position 1, and Opening A will be used.

* "Cat's Cradles," by Kathleen Haddon (Longmans, Green & Co., 1912).

Position 1 will be clear from the following diagram—

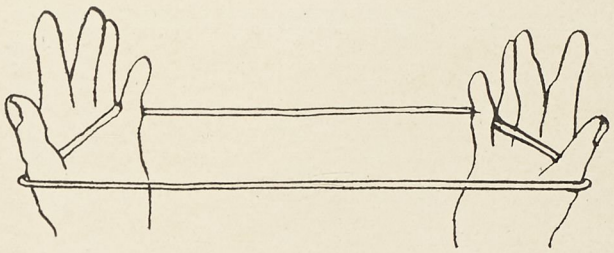

FIG. 1—POSITION 1

Opening A—Place string on hand in Position 1. With back of the right index take up from the proximal side (or from below) the left palmar string and return.

With the back of the left index take up from the proximal side the right palmar string and return. The result will be as shown in the following figure.

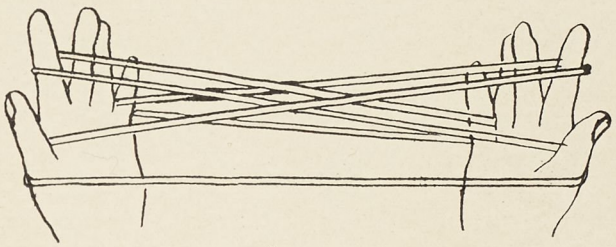

FIG. 2—OPENING A.

In the finished figure the strings must be pulled apart carefully, and in every case it is possible to undo the figure without knotting the string.

The string selected should be smooth and pliable, and one which will not be liable to kink. A length of about six feet six inches is usually the most convenient, the join being as smooth as possible.

NIGERIAN FIGURES

1. A DRUM=Ilu (obtained from an Egbe boy at Ogbomosho).

Opening A.

Pass middle fingers distally into the thumb loops, pick up radial string and return, releasing thumbs.

Pass thumbs distally through middle finger loops, pick up radial little finger string from below, return through middle finger loops, and place this string over the little fingers.

Navaho the little finger strings.

Release index loops and draw out.

To undo release little finger strings.

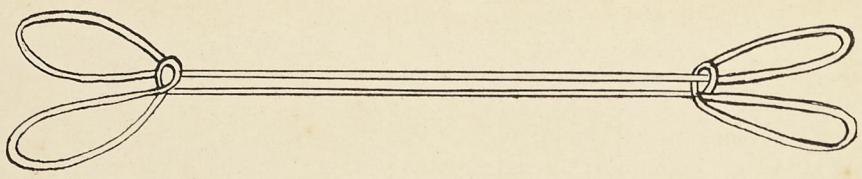

FIG. 3—A DRUM.

cf. "Crow's Feet," but new method. cf. Also Cunnington 5, "A Wooden Spoon" (Tanganyika), and Parkinson 4, "A Fu-fu Stick" (Yoruba).

2. A BAT=Adan. (Obtained in Ilesha).

Place string over big toe, and twist once round it.

Hold up long loop and put both hands through it, so that it lies over both wrists.

Twist hands inwards *over* string which goes from wrist to wrist, and rotate, bringing them up *outside* the long strings which run to the foot. String is now tightly twisted round each wrist.

With index fingers pick up toe loop. Draw this up in front of wrist string, and allow wrist loops to drop over finger loops. Pull tight, slipping thumb and finger of each hand through these finger loops. These form the wings, while the triangle above the foot forms the Bat's body.

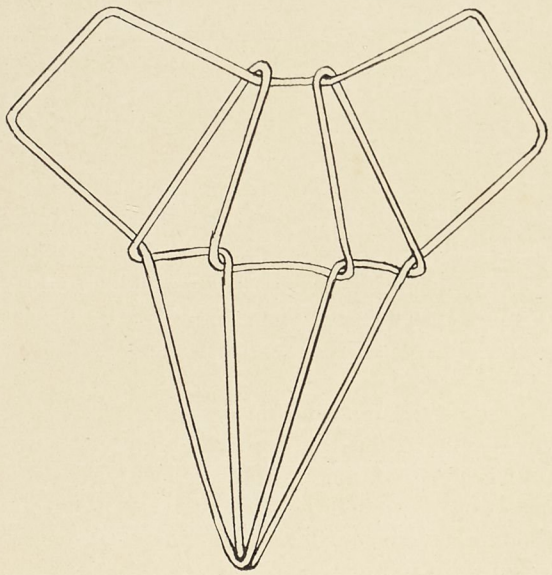

FIG. 4—A BAT

This figure is the same as Parkinson 5, "Bat" (Yoruba).

3. A BAT—(obtained from an Opobo boy).

Place string round big toe and wind round once.

Hold long loop over fingers of left hand with palm uppermost.

With right index finger and thumb pull up toe loop between middle fingers of left hand. Pull this loop well above hand, keeping fingers closed to hold string.

Throw forward this loop over all the other strings as in Fig. 5.

Put right hand over 1, under 2, over 3 and 4, under 5 and over 6.

Drop strings from left hand, draw up the two loops thus formed, holding one in each hand. Draw out as in Fig. 6.

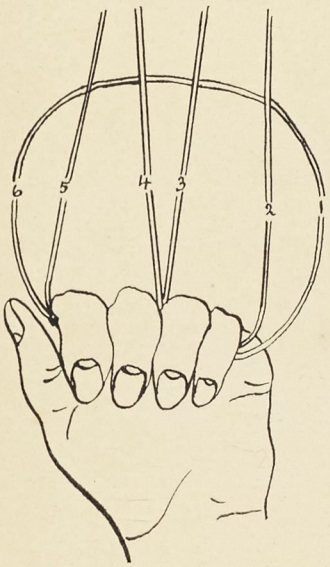

FIG. 5.

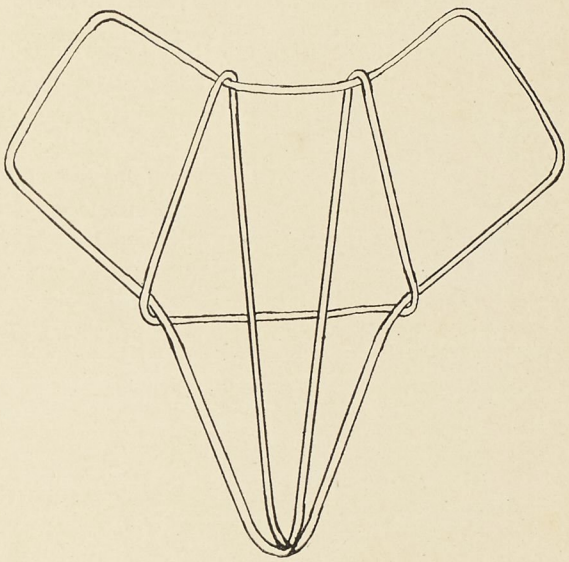

FIG. 6—A BAT

cf. Kraus 5 (Tanganyika), Parkinson 7 (Yoruba), Griffith 20 (Gold Coast), but different method.

4. A HANGING TRICK. (Obtained in Ilesha).

I have been told that this is called BUSH FOWL ROPE=Ode Okun (literally, TRAP ROPE).

Put string over head, and wind once round the neck with right hand, so that one loop is tight round the neck, and one long loop hangs in front.

Hold sides of this loop and cross right hand under left.

Pick up strings where they cross and put this double loop over the head.

Pull front loop and strings will come off the neck.

This is the same as Cunnington 2 (Zomba).

5. DEAD MAN LYING ON A BED=Oku nsun lago. (Seen in Ilesha and Ibadan).

Position 1.

Pass right hand under left palmar string, and left hand under right palmar string, so that one string lies over each wrist.

With thumb and finger of each hand pick up the cross formed by the little finger and wrist strings, placing them over the thumbs.

Navaho the thumb strings, by bringing single thumb string over the upper two.

Bring wrist strings over hands and draw out, extending thumbs and little fingers.

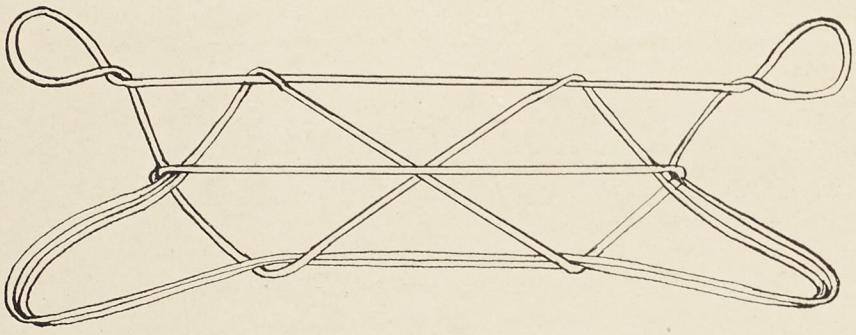

FIG. 7—DEAD MAN LYING ON A BED.

6. A SAW=Ayun. (Obtained in Ilesha).

Place single string over the top of the head, crossing it under the chin.

Pull out with thumbs and put the transverse string between the teeth.

Let another person pull forward the head string.

Move hands in and out, and let helper pull backwards and forwards to imitate the movement of a saw.

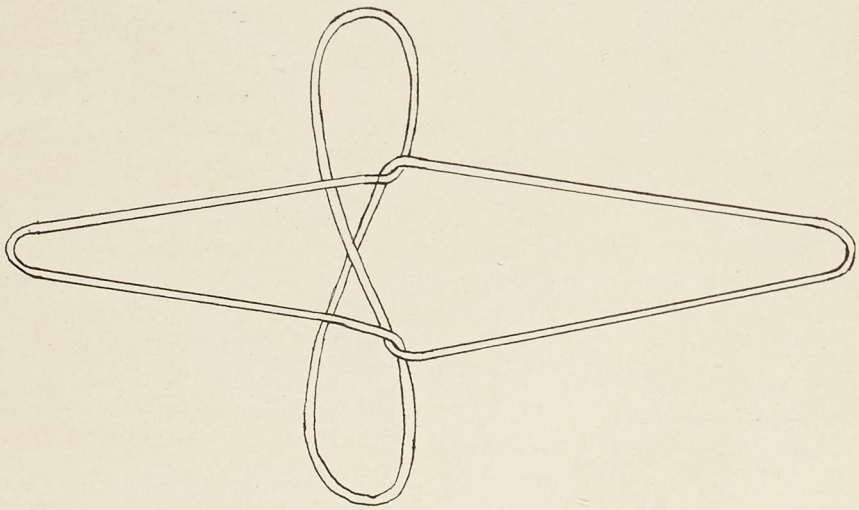

FIG 8—A SAW

Same result but differently made : "Sawing Wood" (English), and cf. Griffith 27 "Weaving Cloth" (Gold Coast).

7. A Bridge=Afa. (Obtained in Ilesha).

Opening A.

Release thumbs. With thumbs take up ulnar little finger strings from below, and return under the other strings.

Release little fingers.

Insert thumbs into the index loops from the distal side, and with their backs pick up the ulnar strings of that finger.

With backs of little fingers pick up ulnar proximal thumb strings from the proximal side and return.

Release thumbs.

With backs of thumbs pick up the radial little finger strings and return.

Place index loops over thumbs, and navaho the thumb strings (do not remove index).

Place first fingers into triangles formed in front of the thumbs from the distal side.

Release little fingers.

Turn hands over and outwards, and extend.

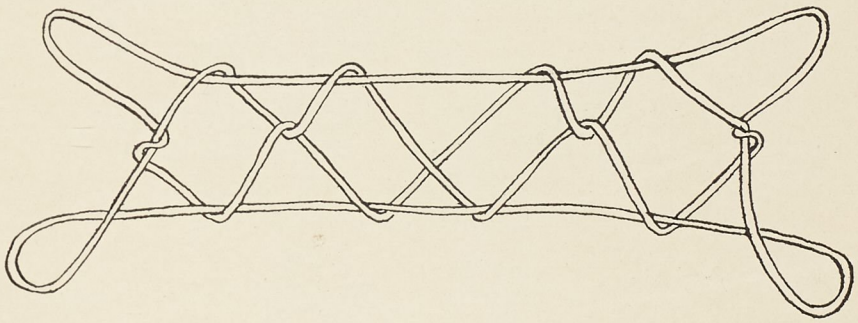

FIG 9—A BRIDGE

This figure is the same as Cunnington 1 (Zomba), Parkinson 1 (Yoruba), Haddon 5 (S. Africa), etc., etc. (see above).

8. Bush Fowl Running Away. (Obtained from an Ilorin boy).

Place string over each thumb. Bring right hand counter-clockwise round back of left hand, and with the right little finger hook up left thumb strings from the proximal side, and extend.

With left little finger hook up right thumb strings from ulnar side, but proximal to the right little finger strings.

Bring left wrist strings over the fingers and draw knot tight. This is Bush Fowl.

Release little fingers and the fowl runs away.

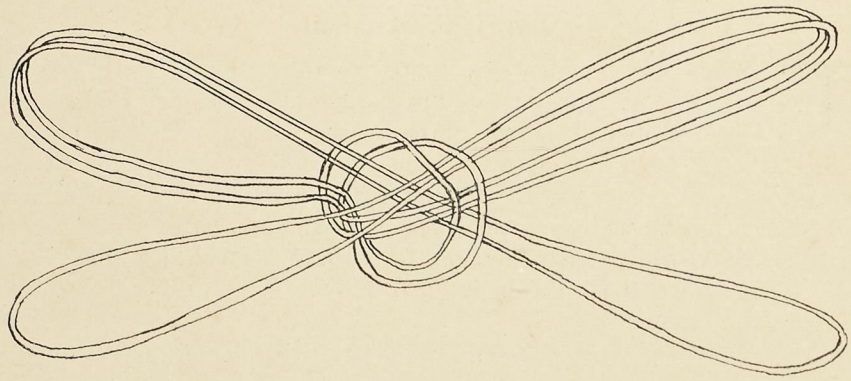

FIG. 10—BUSH FOWL (BEFORE PULLING TIGHT).

Cf. "Locust," Cunnington 19 (Uganda).

9. PAIR OF SCISSORS. (Learned from Kaba boy in Ilorin).

Position 1 on left hand.

Pull forward palmar string with right hand (over long loop).

Pull tight and over long loop pull forward new palmar string, making new long loop but not pulling tight.

Put right hand through long loop from the distal side, under short thumb loop, and with thumb and index pick up radial thumb string, and ulnar little finger string.

Draw through, and work backwards and forwards.

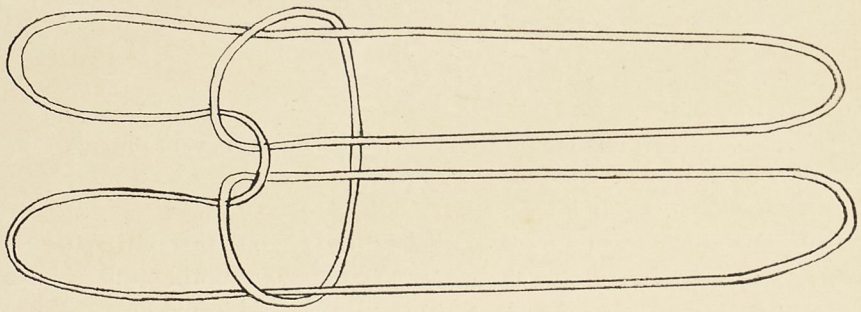

FIG. 11—PAIR OF SCISSORS.