

Malawi String Figure Project

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How to say “String Figure” in Malawi

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PART 1

At some time in the 1840’s a young man who would become known as Salimini was captured and sold into the Swahili slave trade in the area of what is now Salima. (He had grown up around present-day Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi.) He was marched, doubtless carrying a tusk, to Mombasa, on the Indian Ocean, where in 1853 by a happy turn of events he entered into the employment of the Rev. Dr. Johannes Rebmann of the Church Missionary Society, who had established himself at Kisulutini. (He anglicized his name to John Rebman and is perhaps best known as the first European to discover both Mount Kilimanjaro and – to popular disbelief in London – the presence of snow in Africa: he has left his name to a glacier.) Rebmann, who served in East Africa for some thirty years, had philological interests, and took the opportunity to record the language of Salimini’s homeland, which he called Kiniassa, the ‘Language of [Lake] Niassa’. The resulting dictionary, which draws on work of 1853 – 1855 but was published only in 1877 by Rebmann’s colleague the Rev. Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf, is the earliest testament to what is now Chichewa (a Bantu language: it was renamed from Chinyanja by H. E. the Life President of the Republic of Malawi, Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, who also anointed it one of the two national languages of the country). Rebmann’s conversations with Salimini predate Dr. David Livingstone’s Zambezi Expedition of 1858 – 1864, in the course of which he became the first European other than Portuguese traders to reach Lake Malawi, so Rebmann’s Dictionary of the Kiniassa Language must count among the first attempts (and on the largest scale) to record any sub-Saharan African language outside South Africa.

It is intriguing that among the words recorded by Rebmann is MADE (two syllables; the ‘a’ is marked with a macron), which he identifies as a collective singular noun and glosses as follows: ‘a game played with threads or strings over the fingers (the rat’s cradle of the children of England)’. (By ‘rat’s’ we may suppose an African Titivillus sought to obscure ‘cat’s’.) The only possible conclusion is that Rebmann understood Salimini’s explanation of MADE to mean that Salimini was familiar with string figures (‘cat’s cradle’ is a generic term) in the Lilongwe area that he had left some ten years earlier, in the 1840’s. If so, this is important evidence for both the antiquity and

the continuity of string figures in Malawi.

MADE reappears with this meaning in the Rev. Dr. David Clement Scott's seminal Cyclopædic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language (1892) (Mang'anja is a Southern dialect of Nyanja): 'it also means the game of "cat's cradle"'. However, his primary meaning, which is not entirely unrelated, is 'THREADS WHICH ARE WOVEN OR INTERLACE; interlacing, plaiting'. He admits also a rare singular form LIDE and comments further that MADE may be used in expressions to refer to 'strands of a rope, plaits of bamboo... the threads of a woven cloth, the strands of a basket made and finished... strands of a grain-store'. Although it is not impossible that the secondary meaning 'cat's cradle' derives from Rebmann, the primary meaning is original to Scott, so he clearly had independent knowledge of the word.

Scott is followed by the Rev. Dr. Alexander Hetherwick, who edited and enlarged Scott's work (1929) as a Dictionary of the Nyanja Language. However, at this point MADE goes underground. It is not to be discovered in any of the several local editions of the Rev. Dr. Steven Paas' Chichewa – English Dictionary that he produced around the turn of the millennium, but it makes an unexpected reappearance in his more recent Oxford Dictionary (2016) as 'fabric of woven cloth', which would suggest a contraction of Scott and Hetherwick's 'made a nsaru'. ('Nsalu' / 'Nsaru' in itself means 'cloth'.) However, this must be taken on trust: I have asked native speakers of just about all Malawi's Bantu languages whether they recognise the word MADE and have yet to encounter anyone who knows it with any meaning: either 'cat's cradle' or 'cloth'; and Paas forgets his source (personal communication, August 2018).

Thus not for the first time in the pursuit of string figures in Malawi, the investigation reaches an impasse (see further on CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU below): it looks as if once upon a time there were string figures known as MADE, but they are not called that now, and we have no idea what form those known to Salimini (and possibly Scott) may have taken. It is probable that string figures were described with reference to the imagery of weaving, whether of cloth or of baskets, but there is nothing to exclude the alternative reading, that the influence worked the other way around and that string figures gave their name to weaving!

We must conclude with the interesting observation of Mr. Andrew Goodson of Kamuzu Academy (personal communication, August 2018) that it may be possible to construe MADE as the plural of UD[H]E, which is glossed by Rebmann as 'a cobweb'. There are problems here: Rebmann does not recognise a singular of MADE and the singular form LIDE ('seldom if ever used') attested in Scott / Hetherwick belongs to a different noun group. However, Goodson observes that the online Chichewa Dictionary (which began life c. 2000 as the Mtanthuiziramawu wa Chinyanja and is a project of the Centre for Linguistic Study, University of Malawi) suggests that, if UDE had a plural, it would be MA-UDE, although MADE itself is not derived from UDE: both words are attested and glossed in Chichewa, MADE as 'threads which go in and out of one another when weaving a cloth by hand' and UDE as 'web of a spider, cobweb' (Goodson's translations). Accordingly, so Goodson argues, if Rebmann's UD[H]E were to have a plural, it would likely be MA-UDE, and there is evidence from elsewhere in Old Chichewa for the contraction of plurals (e.g. 'matu' for 'makutu', 'ears'): by analogy we might expect MADE, which would now bear a literal meaning 'cobwebs'. This is attractive, and relates to the next part of this discussion, but in the absence of confirmation of either word from a native speaker, it is necessarily speculative.

(Thanks are due to my former colleague Dr. Alexander Suebsaeng for noting MADE in my copy of Scott and to Mr. Andrew Goodson and the Rev. Dr. Steven Paas for their help in pursuing the

matter.)

PART 2

Dr. William Cunnington (1906) is the first to have recorded particular string figures (actually one string figure – ‘no name ascertainable’ but described according to the nomenclature ‘devised by Drs. Rivers and Haddon’ – and one ‘string trick’) from what is now Malawi, during a brief stay in Zomba, the capital of the old protectorate, in 1904. He mentions (p. 123) that the ‘general name for all string figures’ is CHITAGAO, but without further explanation. However, his informants were Yao (a sergeant and one or two men of the native military police, certainly, and ‘James’, the head servant of the Governor of the day, probably), so it may be supposed that the word belongs to Chiyao, the language of the Yao.

CHITAGAO appears as CHITAGAU in two further sources. (Note that the last two vowels are in diaeresis.) Dr. Hugh Stannus Stannus, in his study of the Machinga Yao (1922), records (with diagram) a string figure from one of his female patients, also in Zomba. He notes that it is called ‘the net’, and that a development of one of the three ways of making it is called ‘the child’ (in English: he does not give the Chiyao). Moreover, he comments (p. 363): ‘Cat’s cradles are known as chitagau, “the spider’s web”.’ (He offers also, with Chiyao text and English translation, an account of a children’s naming game for fingers.) The same word, with different orthography, is recorded by Dr. Meredith Sanderson, also a medical doctor, in his seminal dictionary of Chiyao (1954): ‘Citagau, n., a spider’s web (Syn. lundandambuli)’. However, he does not identify his sources.

It may also be apposite here to mention Stannus’ earlier account of the Nyanja people (1910). Writing of the people around what is now Mangochi, he offers (p. 332) the bald record, ‘Tandande (= the spider) is cat’s cradle.’

Apart from the elusive MADE, I know of no further testament in the existing literature to the presence of string figures in Malawi. (This includes Mr. Yohanna Abdallah’s remarkable account (1973) *Chiikala cha Wayao*, ‘The Customs of the Yao’, which was first published in 1919. It has sections devoted to ‘Children’s Toys’ and ‘Dances and Initiation Ceremonies’: vide infra.) Accordingly, it would appear that in the time of Cunnington and Stannus, the image employed by their Yao and Nyanja informants to describe string figures in general was that of a spider’s web (or possibly just a spider), and that the word used in Chiyao was CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU. The existence of this word in its literal sense is confirmed by Sanderson.

However, it is further testament to the remarkable idiosyncrasy of the Malawi lexicon that over the last two years of research I have not encountered a single speaker of Chiyao (or any other Malawian language) who knows the word CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU, in either its literal or metaphorical sense. I have asked Yao colleagues and pupils at Kamuzu Academy, and my Malawian assistant Mr. Samson Phiri has confirmed that it is not known to our informants at Nsanama Village, Machinga and Maryam Girls’ Teacher Training College, Mangochi, both of which are Chiyao-speaking districts.

To the extent that the word suggests anything at all, it is said to be ‘deep Chiyao’, and possibly related to CHITAGU. (I have heard this several times, but especially from Miss Stawa Shaibu, the Dame of Kamuzu Academy.) The word is also known to Sanderson (1954): ‘Citagu, n., a puzzle, riddle, parable; a conjuring trick... (2) A catch-word; a proverb. (3) Astonishment... (4), adv.,

Wonderfully...’ It remains in use, as the following personal communication (March 2017) from Dr. Ian Dicks, anthropologist of the Machinga Yao and senior editor of the Ciyawo-English Dictionary Project, indicates: ‘The word *chitagu* is a common word in Ciyawo with various senses. The senses that I am familiar with are: 1) Proverb, 2) Game, dance or demonstration activity. The latter is used in reference to games or activities at initiation, *unyago*, particularly *msondo*. See page 159 of [Dicks (2012)]. Abdallah also uses the term in [Abdallah (1973)], p. 22. As I read the Ciyawo text it appears that Abdallah uses it to refer to “something amazing, a phenomenon”.’

It is gratifying that some of the YITAGU (pl. of CHITAGU) played at *msondo* (girls’ initiation) would appear to involve string. Dicks (2012) relates two necklace games (p. 159): one in which initiates weave together necklaces with their mouths; the other in which initiates ‘bob’ for a necklace from a pail of water. The necklace is then worn throughout *msondo*. I note also from Dicks’ book (pp. 353 – 354), although it was not suggested by any informant, the word CHITEGA, which refers to a witchcraft trap embodied within a medicated string. (It is also known to Sanderson (1954), s.v. ‘Citaka’, albeit without any reference to string.) Dicks himself has not observed string figures, although they are certainly alive and well among the Machinga Yao.

There is, in fact, an individual string figure that is called ‘spider’s web’ (*nyumba ya kangau* in Chichewa, lit. ‘house of the spider’): we have recorded it in the collection. However, the word is never generalized to other string figures. The expression used in Chichewa-speaking Mtunthama (Kasungu district) and Mua (Dedza district), is KU-LUKA, which is a verb: both transitive and intransitive. According to the Rev. Dr. Steven Paas’ Oxford Dictionary (2016) it bears the meaning, ‘-plait’, ‘-weave’, ‘-braid’, ‘-stitch’, ‘-knit’, ‘-crotchet’ (sic), ‘-spin’, ‘-yarn’ (sic), ‘-vomit’ (?), although as our informants in both places were largely young girls, ‘braiding’ (of hair) might be an especially appropriate image. However, in other places, including Chiyao-speaking Machinga and Mangochi districts, our informants had no name for their activity at all: if pressed they would offer (in Chichewa) the rather periphrastic KU-SEWERA NDI ULUSI, which means no more than ‘playing with wool’. Even the unadorned expressions MASEWERA (‘games’) and (English) STRING may be used! Although it may seem alarming to those of us whose intellects have been shaped by Aristotle, it is not uncommon for Malawians to lack names for what lies around them. My Chinese colleague at Kamuzu Academy presented an interesting parallel: he denied not only knowledge of string figures, which is reasonable (although they exist, and indeed his wife is knowledgeable), but also any expression in Chinese to describe them. (He subsequently relented and kindly forwarded an article on the subject that is entitled ‘fan hua sheng’: ‘flowering rope’, I believe.)

What then of the spiders and spiders’ webs that so attracted Cunningham and Stannus in Southern Malawi toward the beginning of last century? Certainly, although string figures have survived, and perhaps flourished, in an abundance that these two gentlemen did not suspect, the expression CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU is no more. Now it is curious that neither of the two (arguably three) string figures collected by Cunningham and Stannus resembles a spider’s web at all closely: the *nyumba ya kangau* of our collection is much truer to life. Furthermore, the most common string figure today is probably the ‘gate’ (which has several varieties), and this is the same as the ‘net’ recorded by Stannus, so there is no reason to suppose that the situation one hundred years ago was significantly different. But there is no suggestion from our informants that string figures should be called collectively ‘gates’ or ‘nets’: the names would describe only one type of string figure. There is mystery here.

It is (once again) necessarily speculative, but I am inclined by the strange ignorance of CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU, together with the odd half-memory of ‘deep Chiyao’ and the intriguing reference in

Dicks' study to wonder... Is it possible that Cunnington and Stannus heard CHITAGU as CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU: the image of the spider and its web (for which they give no authority) resonating across cultural boundaries more clearly than reference to the inaccessible arcana of girls' initiation? Is it possible that string figures, although now apparently profaned to public view, once played some part in initiation, at least among the Yao? Is it even possible to apply Occam's razor and to suppose that what Cunnington and Stannus really heard in response to their enquiries about string figures was (merely, but appropriately to those who appreciate the art), '[That is] something amazing, a phenomenon'?

PART 3

(Part 3 refers to the String Figures of Malawi collected between 2016 and 2018 and published in this article.)

It remains to ask in brief whether our informants have any expression for their art other than KULUKA, KU-SEWERA NDI ULUSI, MASEWERA, STRING and the like. In this case, as often in Malawi, the particular yields a more fruitful enquiry than the general. For our informants are usually quite definite what their string figures represent. (The Rwandan whom we interviewed, by way of contrast, described her string figures only in geometric terms and seemed perplexed by the suggestion that she might explain them in any other way.)

Malawians incline to see in their string figures objects from the world (often of the village) around them (the ubiquitous gates, items of dress, pots and strainers, ducks and spiders, and even relatively recent additions to the landscape, such as network towers, etc.) and what is familiar from their primary school lessons (one thinks immediately of all those letters of the alphabet). It is seldom difficult to relate the string figure to the description, which in many cases is also a matter of convention: ducks are kept commonly in Malawi, but not every creator of the 'duck's foot' will have made a close study of the original. It is an attractive feature of this collection of the String Figures of Malawi that a cursory reading even of just the index allows a telling impression of the physical environment and concerns of their creators.

There are exceptions to this (as there must be always). So, for example, 'heart' ('mtima') and 'love' are used interchangeably, but the association is an obvious one in a Christian society, and there is no suggestion of a metaphysical reading. There is also very occasionally an informant who professes that a string figure has 'no name', but the implication here is that the name is either unknown or forgotten, not that the string figure should not have a name. Only one informant uses the abstract expression 'grade' ('2' and '4') to describe his string figures: this proves the rule.

However, it is interesting to consider, in course of discussion of the apparent loss of a common word for 'string figure' (Parts 2 and 3), that the language used to describe a particular string figure is either English (e.g. 'duck's foot') or Chichewa (or one of the other vernacular languages) that has a known English equivalent (e.g. 'phazi la bhaka'). With two exceptions, where the Chichewa is used effectively as a loan word in English ('chilepa' and 'positila') and the English equivalent ('drying stand' and 'ironing board') is not commonly known, there is no example of a string figure that is referred to only in Chichewa (or one of the other vernacular languages). Indeed, it is quite common that an informant will insert the English name of a string figure into a conversation that is conducted otherwise in Chichewa, even when there is an equivalent Chichewa name. This is true of interviews that occur in both more and less formal settings (e.g. schools and villages). This may reflect the context in which many of our informants learn their string figures: either from friends

at school or, in some cases, directly from their teachers. It may also reflect the wish to confer on string figures the status of English terms imparted by primary school textbooks. Where the preferred language to name a particular string figure is English, it is unlikely that terms such as MADE and CHITAGAO / CHITAGAU would survive.

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