

Malawi String Figure Project

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“The String Figures of Malawi”

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Finding String Figures in Malawi

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A. S. Haddon (1906) comments on the disappointment that a visit to South Africa the previous year had occasioned when he sought opportunity to look up native (by which black African) traditions of string figures: ‘Not a single white person to whom I mentioned the subject had seen or heard of the game among 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.’ His paper, which is perhaps rather grudging, records the one string figure he discovered among the Zulu (‘I think they must be rare’), together with another eight observed by others and an account of ‘Cat’s Cradle’ that is owed to a work that bears the memorable, if somewhat dated, name *Savage Childhood*. They derive from the Zambezi River, Bulawayo (ex Beira) and the old Natal Province, although there is no doubt but that Haddon would have discovered more, if only he had ‘eyes to see’.

Our knowledge of string figures from what is now Malawi begins in the same era of gentleman scientists who directed amateur interest toward the matter in the course of their work and travels. W. A. Cunnington (1906) and H. S. Stannus (1910, 1922) express themselves, unlike Haddon, more grateful to discover any string figures at all, but the number they contribute to the written record for this part of Central Africa is but one (together with a string ‘game’ and, possibly, ‘Cat’s Cradle’, although Cunnington finds more to relate from Lake Tanganyika).

Thus the picture remained until, in January 2016, Alisoun Probert, who was staying at Mua Mission, Dedza District, to undertake good work at the Deaf School, discovered, in the garden of the house where she was staying, children who were about a task which, for them, was quite natural: while they sang and played other games, from time to time one would lead the others in the making of string figures. By the sort of coincidence to which is owed more progress in science than is usually admitted, Alisoun happens to be the daughter of Martin Probert, the author of this article.

Alisoun returned to England, but questions remained: if string figures are there for a visitor to observe in a Mua garden, what else might Malawi hold? are some districts or tribes of Malawi

better versed in string figures than others? is there a common body of knowledge and / or is there evidence of regional variation? and what significance, if any, might string figures hold for those who make them? At this point I was pleased to take up the task, together with my assistant Samson Phiri, a Chewa from Kasungu District, where Kamuzu Academy, at which I teach, is situated.

I had encountered string figures in England – indeed from Martin and his wife Veronika – but never in Malawi, and in any case it had not occurred to pursue an interest. Samson (at the time) had neither knowledge nor interest. Thus we approached the search with little expectation of success, nor even of what we might hope to find, but we were willing to travel and to ask as many questions as necessary, until we had some sense of the overall picture (supposing there were one). What follows is a brief account of how Samson and I came to amass the material that Martin used subsequently to compile this article on the String Figures of Malawi.

We began by approaching the children whom Alisoun had observed at Mua Mission, and asking them to prepare a performance of string figures that Samson might record by video camera. This they were very happy to do, and the result became the first in our substantial collection of recordings. As became our method, we chose to ‘sample’: having found informants of ability and good will, we allowed them to represent their particular area (or institution), supposing that, as news of our interest spread, others who might contribute would be drawn into the group. Samson became increasingly skilled at recording the hand movements necessary to make the string figures and in asking about informants’ names and details, and (in the most neutral way) about the names and origins of the string figures they had to show. This information was then transcribed and translated exactly into English. It became clear soon enough that we had also an extraordinary opportunity to record the context in which string figures are created in Malawi, especially songs and games, which are considered other entertaining pastimes by (mostly) girls at play.

Mua Mission has been the home since 1976 of Fr. Claude Boucher, a Canadian missionary and anthropologist, who has just celebrated fifty years of life in Malawi. It seemed obvious to ask him what he had seen of string figures at Mua Mission over four decades. He denied any knowledge, but thought that long ago he had seen such things at Nsipe, in Ntcheu District, where he had been posted as a young man. This is the first example of an occasion on which the otherwise informed had overlooked the presence of a rich tradition of string figures in their midst! Boucher chose also to discount the children’s own description of some of their models according to letters of the alphabet in favour of Ngoni geometric designs called *chihata*, which surprised the children when they were informed, and strikes me as far fetched.

Samson was the next to stand convicted of – let us say – Haddon’s oversight. I received a visit one afternoon to my house at Kamuzu Academy from Cathy, Samson’s niece (Samson is the malume, the eldest maternal uncle, so far more important in a Chewa family than her father), who was awaiting Annie, her mother and my housekeeper. Not having a great deal of conversation to make with a ten-year old girl, albeit a very bright one, I showed Cathy some of the recordings from Mua. Samson had assured me he had never seen string figures in Kasungu District, and that these must be a phenomenon of Mua Mission, so I was surprised when Cathy explained not only that she could make all the Mua string figures Samson had recorded, but also that she knew more and better. I had no string (string is not all that easy to find in Malawi), but much to her credit Cathy improvised with strips of torn *chitenje*, and proved herself a mistress of the art. Samson was duly informed, and Cathy and her friends became our principal informants in Mtunthama. Moreover, as they recalled string figures not performed at the first recording, they would let Samson or me

know, so there was an ongoing process of addition to the collection.

Kamuzu Academy draws pupils from across Malawi: indeed, its Government scholars (of whom the last generation is in residence) are appointed two from each district, although the relationship to the district is sometimes tenuous. Malawian teachers tend also to represent different parts of the country, and I began the next stage of our campaign with colleagues. Letters and written notices, although necessary, are ignored in Malawi, which is only a borderline literate society, rather as some describe the Greece of Homer, and I was not surprised that the response was null. I sent Samson to make further enquiry in person, and Stawa Shaibu, alumna of Kamuzu Academy and now the Dame, proved helpful. Her sister Aisha had studied at Maryam Girls' Teacher Training College (TTC) in Mangochi District, and spoke fondly of Madam Semu, one of the lecturers (educated at the University of Malawi but with sound traditional values even so). Arrangement was made by cellphone, and at the appointed hour – even, to my astonishment, the minute – after securing a laissez-passer from the Sudanese principal, we found Madam Semu with a group of students and children from the adjacent school, ready to show off their string figures. It is Martin's task to describe the significance of what we found, but our visit to Maryam Girls' TTC illustrates very well how casual enquiry might open up a whole new, and hitherto unsuspected, perspective on string figures. All of our informants thus far (just about) had been girls of primary school age, from Central Region, either Chewa or Chewa / Ngoni, and Christian. At Maryam Girls' TTC, we found young women participating just as eagerly, from throughout Malawi (Madam Semu herself is from Southern Region), predominantly Yao, and all Muslim. Moreover, some of these string figures are not otherwise attested, and others, on similar themes (such as letters of the alphabet), are significantly different in construction and form; we even encountered for the first time a string figure that has an accompanying song.

An intriguing detail that must remain inaccessible to pursuit is that Aisha Shaibu is recalled by her sister Stawa to have spoken of Madam Semu as so skilled in her art that 'she can make string figures on her toes'. Now, Madam Semu includes macramé in the string figures at her disposal, so quite in what this skill consists is not clear, but.... Cunnington also describes (and illustrates) a string figure made on the toes, over a hundred years earlier. Madam Semu, as a Muslim lady of a certain number of years, is not about to remove her shoes for a visitor, but she did not deny this accomplishment when I asked, and it would display remarkable continuity if there were indeed a relationship. It is also to Madam Semu's credit that she alone of adult informants recognises the cultural and pedagogic value of teaching children string figures.

Back in Mtunthama I mentioned this journey to Chikondi Medson, a former pupil who had completed his first Classics degree in Rome and was living with his schoolmasters, in return for various jobs of work, while he applied for scholarships to pursue his studies in the US. He explained that there were girls in Nsanama, his home village in Machinga District (once part of Mangochi District and culturally similar), who had the art of string figures. Samson and I drove back down-country with Chikondi, and we were glad to have reached this rather distant place, high in the hills toward the Mozambican border: the recordings are among our happiest and most interesting, and the string figures include our most complex (the 'Shawl', which is made by two people). Chikondi's mother, who had learned string figures as a girl, is one of our few adult informants.

At this point Samson took the initiative. Ellen Phiri, his wife, is a teacher at Vikwa Primary School, which is close to Kamuzu Academy, but represents a very different world. (Its pupils are the sons and daughters of subsistence farmers, market traders and workers at Kamuzu Academy.) Ellen

teaches Standard 5, and the exercise was to see how many string figures a class of primary school children, chosen to all purposes at random, might be able to summon among themselves. There is nothing spectacular in our collection, but it suggests, if possible to extrapolate elsewhere, that most village children (boys and girls) are likely to know at least something of string figures, even if it is just a letter of the alphabet.

The obvious next step was to resume enquiry at Kamuzu Academy: this time with the pupil body. I arranged a display for Speech Day, which was attended by the Vice President, and Cathy and friends contributed a demonstration of string figures, but the display was met, for the large part, with indifference.

There were two important exceptions. The first was Phatuma Mapelela, a young lady cleaner, who showed off the string figures she knew, and invited Samson to film more at her house in the village. The other was Aissa Ruberintwari, a Rwandan sixth former, who was persuaded to display the string figures she had learned in her native Kigali. For those able to make the journey Aissa says there are more string figures in Rwanda that she has not learned: it would be interesting to know whether there is any record at all. They would appear to be distinguished by being named not for some perceived resemblance to an object in the physical world but for the geometry of their design, which is an attractive method.

The difficulty presented by our Malawian pupils is to counter the prevailing mentality that anything that might be construed as traditional (i.e. lacking in the faux modernity proselytised by satellite television and the majority of their Malawian teachers) is a source of embarrassment. I tried again: this time on two consecutive Saturday morning assemblies, at which Andrew Wild, deputy headmaster, kindly imparted the necessary status to our task, and Cathy displayed string figures to the pupil body while Samson lay in wait at the back of the Auditorium with a video camera for any pupils ready to loosen their inhibition. This achieved a much better result, although one consequence is that at least some of the string figures recorded at Kamuzu Academy are known to pupils because they were taught by Cathy. Nevertheless, our collection contains some new string figures, and it became abundantly clear that knowledge of string figures is not restricted to the poorest of the poor: they are known to the children of the elites of Lilongwe and Blantyre as well.

At this point Samson and I had been pursuing the string figures of Malawi for eighteen months or so, and we were beginning to think it as well to conclude this initial round of investigation, so that Martin might write up the account. (His intervention in these enquiries was ever welcome and also did a great deal to shape their direction: indeed on several occasions he predicted string figures we had yet to record!) What was intended as our final venture was to set up an expanded display (with close reference to string figures as a device to teach Mathematics) at the National Science Fair, which Kamuzu Academy has hosted over the past ten years. It attracts schools from around the country, and we supposed that delegates (pupils and teachers) might be more likely than many to have minds open to the interest of string figures. In this we were richly rewarded. The Deputy Minister of Education claimed to have string figures to pass on, if only time allowed. It was also satisfying to augment the international collection with string figures recorded from a (white) South African delegate.

Less successful was our attempt to gather string figures from China Week, which followed the National Science Fair. Nevertheless, it was gratifying to hear Kamuzu Academy's (Han) teacher in Mandarin disregard the evidence of the display (further expanded for the occasion) to deny the

possibility of string figures in China on the ground that they benefit minorities and other lesser people, only to discover shortly afterward that his (Han) wife was quite happy to record the 'Bridge' she had learned in Henan Province as a girl. It would appear, in China as in Malawi, that string figures are all around, unobserved in the background, for those who care to look.

We continued to collect string figures in 2018, first at the annual National Science Fair in July, then at Nkhotakota CCAP Secondary School in September. Nkhotakota is a district from which we had had no information. Would string figures be found? Ten different figures were obtained. As a result we are now able to attest string figures for all but three districts of Malawi: Mwanza, Phalombe, Neno, all in Southern Malawi.

This concludes the brief account of how the collection of Malawi string figures came to assume its present form. It encompasses most districts of Malawi (and countries beyond Malawi that are represented in Malawi) and most tribes, and every social-economic and educational level. But I hope it will also have become clear that a different starting point, whether in time or place, would have produced a different collection, and that, for those who have 'eyes to see' there are many such starting points. What is presented here is only the collection that began with Alisoun Probert's observation at Mua Mission of January 2016. Moreover, although there is a core of string figures common to most informants, as Martin ably describes, there appear also to be certain 'outliers', such as the special skill and interest demonstrated in the Yao areas (Mangochi and Machinga Districts). However, nor can it be emphasized too strongly that such is the wealth of information available in Malawi, there may well be other 'outliers', or perhaps material to suggest perceived 'outliers' are not 'outliers' at all, which another casual conversation (or instance of Malawi synchronicity) might reveal to anyone prepared to continue the search. Such work would be most welcome!

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