

Stringing you ... along.

From a very early time, people have practised string games and made a variety of complex and intricate string figures. They made string from whatever they had at hand. Sometimes it was a strip of leather, sometimes it was the stringy part of a plant. Fishermen made figures that looked like fish while desert people made lizards. The Alaskan Inuit may even have a string figure that represents a woolly mammoth! That's how long string stories have been around.

Making string figures was a common practise among most of the tribal peoples in the world. The figures were once associated with religion and mythology and even magic and fortune telling. The indigenous peoples of the Arctic regions believed in a spirit of String Figures. The Navaho believed that the string figures were a gift from Grandmother Spider and only made string figures during the winter months when the true string weavers – spiders - were asleep.

In some cultures, string games carried their own secret messages. Someone might make a figure that meant "let's go fishing" or even a figure that said "help me raid the next village!" If a tribe were expecting an attack they might use string games to keep them awake and aware. In Vancouver Island in Canada, the string figure "Threading a closed loop" was used as a 'password' by the Native Indians to distinguish friends from enemies when they had secret meetings. You wouldn't want to get that figure wrong!

In Aotearoa, string figures were practised to encourage nimbleness of the fingers which was necessary for weaving and taniko work which the women spent a great deal of time doing. The Maori name for String Figures is "whai", short for Te Whai Wawewawe a Maui" meaning "Maui's clever string game" because in Maori legend the game originated with this great Maori hero. Maui's Lasso is a string figure which tells the story of how Maui captured the sun. He held the sun captive in his string lasso until the sun promised to move more slowly across the sky so that Maui's mother and his people had more time to finish their day's work.

Sometimes the same string figures are found in completely different parts of the world. The figures often have different names – what looks like a fishing spear in one part of the world might look more like a broom or a bunch candles in another part of the world.

The string figures found in different cultures usually reflect the work practises of that culture and also reveal something about where they live, what they eat and other things important to those people.

SOUTH AMERICA

Strings were made from cactus fibres. Just like in other parts of the world, the figures represent everyday events - dragonfly, cactus fruit, and a deer; squash a snake and a mosquito!

Common figure - The Mosquito

Australia and the Torres Strait Islands

So many figures come from this part of the world that it is practically the string figure capital of the world. In the Gilbert Islands, it was believed that there was a supernatural hero who was known as Na Ubwebwe. He served as a guide to the underworld and would not let the dead pass into the underworld unless they could make a series of string figures with him.

Common figure -The Palm Tree

Africa

Some string figures have different names depending on where they are found. In Germany there is string figure called the train. The same figure is called the mouse and in Ghana it is called the worm. Many of the string figures that children from Ghana play, have to do with fishing because they live by the sea.

Common figure- The Mouse or Worm

North America

As legend has it, a spirit woman named Spider woman taught the Navajo how to play sting games. Spider woman was a jealous spirit figure who would get angry if she saw anyone making string figures better than hers. That's why Navajo children only play string games while she is sleeping – which for spider is during the winter months. After the first thunderstorm in the spring, Navajo children put away their strings and don't bring them out again until after the first snowstorm each winter.

Common figure - Carrying wood figure

Papa New Guinea

New Guinea is famous for its colourful exotic birds so it is natural the children have a string figure showing a bird flying away. They also have figures showing fish, crocodiles and bananas - all part of their lives.

Common figure - The Flying Bird

Alaska

Eskimos (Inuit) like the Navajo, only played string games during the winter. Because the winters are so long and the sun only shines for a few hours a day, the Inuit children are good at string figure games.

Common figure - Falling Down house

UK

String figures are often used to tell stories. The candle thief who is found in Ireland, Scotland and Germany tells the story of a man who makes the mistake of stealing a bunch of candles from his neighbour. There is string game in Papa New Guinea that tells a similar story but the man steals his neighbour's pigs instead of candles and while the candle thief gets caught, the pig stealer gets away.

Common figure - The Candle Thief

Sources

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