

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PAPERS
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History.**

Vol. XII, Part 1.

STRING-FIGURES FROM THE PATOMANA INDIANS
OF BRITISH GUIANA

BY
FRANK E. LUTZ.

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INTRODUCTION.

While on a zoölogical expedition in British Guiana, I camped for about a month in the vicinity of Kaieteur Falls. Our Indian helpers came from near the Brazilian border still further up the Potaro River. Among them was a bright little fellow about twelve years old who was with me nearly the whole time and who taught me the figures described here. As usual, he would not tell his real name but, as "Crickety" described his happy disposition and sounded something like the one he gave, it was the name that was used.

These Indians called themselves Patomana. The name is doubtless synonymous with Paramona, a sub-tribe of the Ackawoi, of Carib stock. They are almost entirely untouched by civilization although most of them have at least seen strangers and a few of them wear white man's clothes.¹ Crickety was apparently a champion string-figure artist, as ten or a dozen of the Indians with whom we came in contact tried to show me figures he had not, but failed. The notes given here include all that either rivalry or promises of gifts could extract, so that they are probably rather complete for that section.²

The chief point of difference from the figures made by other primitive peoples, as a whole, seems to lie in the common use these Indians make of the shift of loops from the fingers of one hand to the corresponding fingers of the other hand. It is interesting that, with the exception of "tricks" none of these games seem to be duplicated in other parts of the world. To be sure, the end results of two of them are the same as the end results of games by other peoples, but the method of getting these results is different (Figs. 4 and 10).

Position 1, which is the basis of so many string-figures, consists in having the string back of the thumb and little finger but in front of the other fingers.³ All the figures are made with a string (these Indians made their strings of

¹ See "The American Museum Journal," Vol. 11, p. 283.

² As noted in Miss Haddon's recent book on "Cat's Cradles" there is a dearth of data for South American natives. Dr. W. E. Roth collected twenty-four string-figures from the Arawak and Warrau on the Pomeroon and Moruca Rivers (*Revue des Études Ethnographiques et Sociologiques*, 1908, p. 193), but did not give directions for making them. In all his twenty-four figures we find but one described by Dr. Lutz: viz. the fish trap, the name also being in common. The remaining figures seem totally different and on the whole much more complicated than those described in this paper or for that matter in any other publication. As those here described are from the Brazilian frontier they represent one of the wild interior tribes in contrast to those of the coast among whom Dr. Roth collected.

The bibliography of string games may be found in Mrs. C. F. Jayne's book on "String Figures" and Miss Kathleen Haddon's "Cat's Cradles from many Lands." To these have been added a few titles in a book review by Hertermann, *Anthropos*, Vol. 6, p. 1053.—Ed.

³ See Miss Haddon's "Cat's Cradles from many Lands," p. 3.

fiber from the inside of bark) tied to form a circle. Unless otherwise stated, Position 1, means that the string is placed in this manner on each hand.

Opening A consists in placing the string in Position 1 and taking up the palmar string of the left hand from the proximal side on the dorsum of the right index finger. Then reach between the strings of the right index loop thus formed and take up the palmar string of the right hand from the proximal side on the dorsum of the left index finger.

PARROT.

Place a short loop between the index and middle fingers of the left hand. Bring it to the palmar side, passing one string between the thumb and index finger and one string between the middle and ring fingers. Rotate it clockwise, looking at the palm, through 180° and return to the dorsum of the index and middle fingers combined by passing the radial string between the thumb and index fingers and the ulnar string between the middle and ring fingers. Tighten the strings by pulling the long loop.

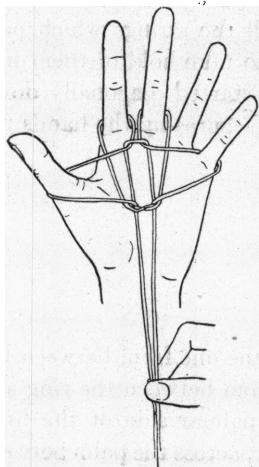


Fig. 1. The Parrot.

There will be two strings between the index and middle fingers. Reaching in from the distal side between the other strings, pull the radial string of the middle finger loop out and place it on the little finger. Likewise, place the ulnar string of the index finger loop on the thumb. Pull the loop running back of both the index and the middle fingers over these fingers and release it on the palmar side. Now, pull the long loop and alternately close in and separate the thumb and little fingers and the parrot will fly (Fig. 1). A fairly short hold should be taken on the long loop to make a "kawack" or green parrot, for it has a short tail. This is an interesting figure on account of the movements used when it is finished.

TOAD.

Position 1 on the left hand. Pull the palmar string into a long loop, making the former long loop a palmar string proximal to it. From the distal side pull out the new palmar string into a long loop. Reaching into this long loop from the distal side pull out the strings passing outside of the thumb and little finger respectively into two long loops.

a Pass from front to back the radial string of the radial loop between the thumb and index fingers, the ulnar string of the ulnar loop between the middle and ring fingers, and the two remaining strings between the index and middle fingers, allowing the loops to hang loose behind.

There will be a loose palmar string and one close to the hand. Reaching proximal of this loose one, pull into long loops the strings which pass between

the index and middle fingers. This will make an apparently hopeless tangle. Repeat *a*.

b Pull the loops that were on the index and middle fingers before *a* was repeated through the new loops and as far out as they will go, leaving the new ones on. This is best done by using the dorsum of the index and middle fingers of the right hand.

Now release the loops on the index and middle fingers of the left. Separate the hands and a rectangular figure will result which may need a little adjustment at its left corner. Repeat *a*.

Reaching under the string which runs from between the thumb and index fingers to between the ring and little fingers, pull the strings which pass between the index and middle fingers being sure to take hold of them just after they have curled around a cross string and started diagonally down the palm. Repeat *a* and *b*. With a little care in separating the hands the figure will result (Fig. 2).

The native name for this figure is "crapo."

BUSH.

Position 1. Twist the palmar strings so that the one from between the thumb and index finger crosses distally the one from between the ring and little fingers. Pass the distal string across the palmar side of the little finger, then around it, between it and the ring finger, across the palm between the index finger and the thumb, making a loop around the latter. There will be one string passing directly across the palm and the proximal of it will be a pair of crossed strings. Put the index and middle finger of the right hand between the crossed strings of the left hand from the proximal side so that the crossing is between the fingers and separates the hands. Do the same with the left hand and the strings on the right taking care that the two strings from between the index and middle fingers of the right hand are between the index and middle fingers of the left before they take up the crossed strings. There will be two loops on each little finger and each thumb. Of these two loops, one of them has a string running to the middle of the mesh. Pull this in each case from the dorsal side, proximally of the other, then pass it over the finger or thumb and release, leaving the other string on. Separate the hands.

Slip the index and middle fingers of the right hand into the loops of the corresponding fingers of the left on the dorsal side and remove these loops to the right hand. Slip the index and middle fingers of the left hand into the loops originally on the corresponding fingers of the right on the dorsal side

and remove these loops to the left hand, bringing over (dorsally) the loops which were originally on the left. Separate the hands quickly with the fingers spread so that the strings "catch" (Fig. 3).

The loops on the one hand represent the roots and those of the other the

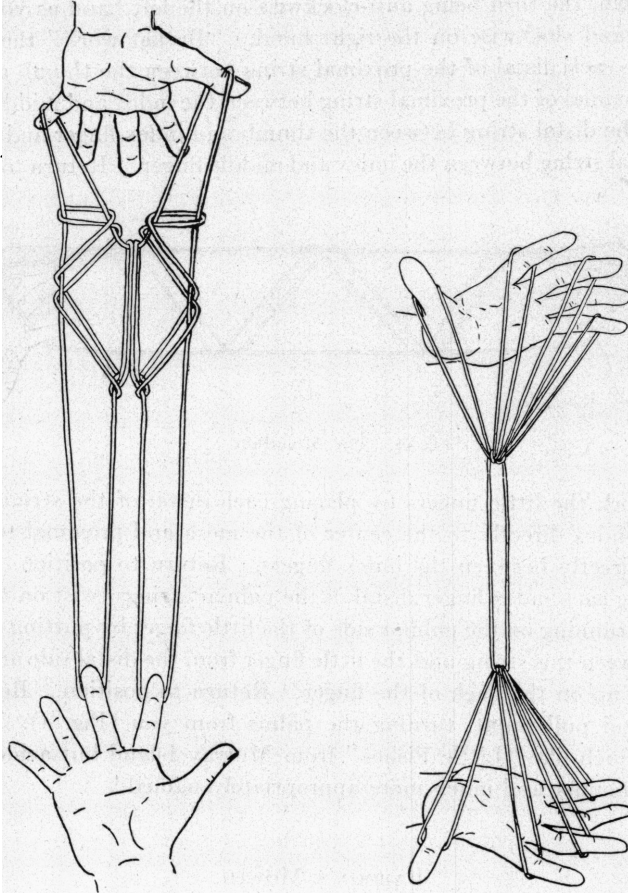


Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 2. The Toad.

Fig. 3. The Bush.

branches of a "bush" which is the general name among the Indians who have come in contact with white men for any sort of a tree. I used an extra long string in learning the figure and Crickety laughingly pointed to a liana.

MOUNTAIN.

Opening A. Release the thumbs. Take the loops from each little finger and place them on the distal end of the corresponding index finger upside down, the turn being anti-clockwise on the left hand as you look at the palm and clockwise on the right hand. "Basket work" the thumbs, i. e., place each distal of the proximal string between the thumb and index finger, proximal of the proximal string between the index and middle fingers, distal of the distal string between the thumb and index finger and proximal of the distal string between the index and middle finger. Return to position.

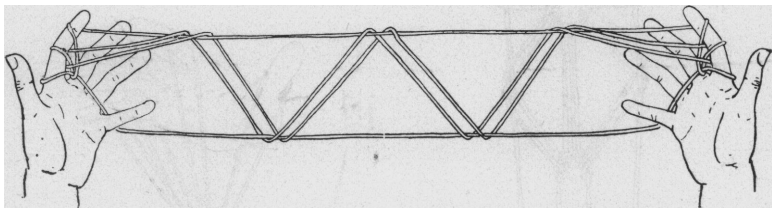


Fig. 4. The Mountain.

Basket work the little fingers by placing each distal of the string running from the index directly to the center of the mesh and proximal to the one running directly between the index fingers. Return to position.

Putting each index finger distal of the palmar strings twist on their ends the string running on the palmar side of the little finger by putting the index finger between this string and the little finger from the distal side and taking the string up on the back of the finger. Return to position. Release the thumbs and pull taunt, turning the palms from you (Fig. 4). The end result is much like "Little Fishes" from Murray Island but achieved in a different manner and much more appropriately named.¹

BABOON'S MOUTH.

Place both hands in the string so that it passes back of each wrist. Grasping the strings near the middle with the right hand pass, from front to back, the radial string between the thumb and index finger of the left hand and the ulnar one between the middle and ring finger of the same hand. Return them to the front by passing them between the index and middle

¹ Miss Haddon, "Cat's Cradles from many Lands," 12.

fingers. Pass the index finger one of the pair between the thumb and index, making a half loop on the thumb. Pass the middle finger one of the pair between the ring and little finger, making a half loop on it.

Take up on the dorsum of the index and middle fingers of the right hand the strings passing in front of the same fingers of the left. Separate the hands. Slip the left wrist loop over the hand and release. Transfer the

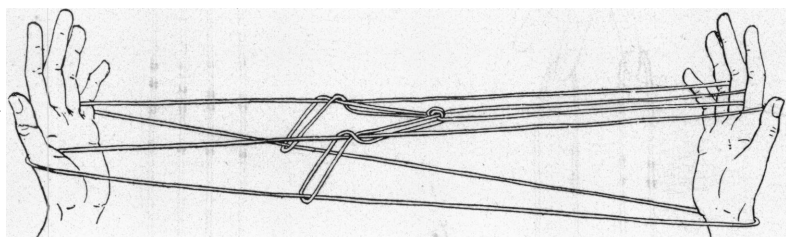


Fig. 5. The Baboon's Mouth.

index and middle finger loops of the right hand to the same fingers of the left. Pull the loops originally on the left index and middle fingers over these and the ends of the fingers and release them. Transfer the loops back to their original position on the right hand. Separate the hands (Fig. 5).

"Baboon" is the name given in British Guiana to the howling monkey. The figure resembles much more an alligator's mouth and as "cayamans" are fairly common, I am surprised at the name.

MONATÀ.

The same operation as "Baboon's Mouth" except that one starts with only the left hand in the loop. I am not certain as to the translation of monatà but think it means a door (Fig. 6).

BIRD SNARE.

The same operation as "Monatà" except that a second loop is put on the left wrist by passing the ulnar string around the wrist once. A little care is necessary to get a good loop in the snare (Fig. 7). This is a fair representation of the snare Crickety made for actual use, the details of which are shown in the accompanying diagrams, Fig. 8.

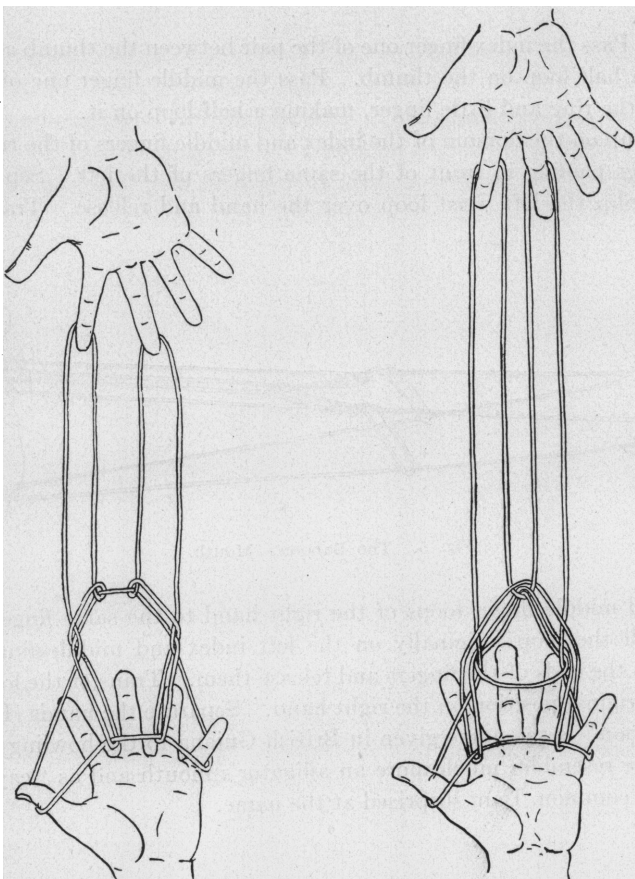


Fig. 6.

Fig. 6. Monatã.

Fig. 7.

Fig. 7. The Bird Snare.

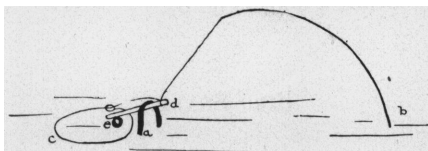


Fig. 8. Sketch of a Snare used for taking Birds. *a* A stout twig with both ends driven well into the ground; *b* a pliable stick or sapling; *c* a slip noose; *d* a smooth stout stick; *e* a pebble. The bait is either fastened to *d* near *e* or scattered about inside the loop. In the latter case, they depend on the movements of the animal to knock *d* off of the pebbles and thus spring the trap.

FISH TRAP.

Put the left hand in the string so that there is a loop back of the wrist. Put on a second (complete) one by passing the ulnar string around the wrist. Pass the strings of the long loop from front to back between the index and middle fingers and then from back to front between the middle and ring fingers. Reaching under (from the radial side) the strings, which run from the wrist to the fingers, pull the long loop through. Pass the radial string of the long loop between the index finger and the thumb, making a half loop

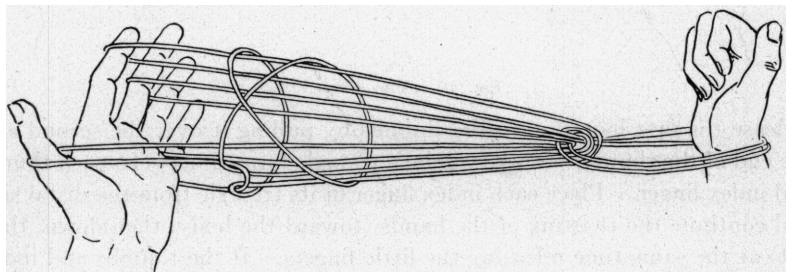


Fig. 9. The Fish Trap.

on the thumb; and the ulnar string of the long loop between the ring and little fingers, making a half loop on the latter. Take up on the dorsum of the index and middle fingers of the right the last mentioned strings respectively and separate the hands. Run the whole right hand into the loop about the left middle finger, doing so on the dorsum of the finger and from the distal side of the loop. In this way remove the loop to the right wrist. Separate the hands. Put the loops of the index and middle fingers of the right hand on the same fingers of the left. Slip the wrist loops of the left over the left hand and release them. Separate the hands (Fig. 9).

The native term for this figure is "mashowo" or fish trap.

RIVER.

Put each hand in the string, having it run back of the wrists. Bring the left ulnar string to the radial side and proximal of the radial string, then distal of it and place it on the little finger without twisting it. The strings to the right hand will, however, be twisted near the middle. Run the right little finger from the radial side under the upright string, which runs between the left ring and little finger, taking this string up on the dorsum of

the finger and separate the hands. Place each wrist loop on the corresponding index finger without twisting (Fig. 10).

Passing each thumb on the distal side of the index loops, take up on its dorsum from the proximal side, the strings between the ring and little fingers. Return the thumbs to position and place on their distal ends that part of the index loop which is between the index fingers and the thumb.

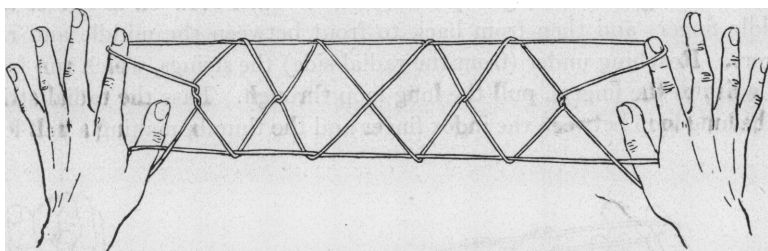


Fig. 10. The River.

Release the first loop put on the thumbs by pulling it over the second and the end of the thumb. There will be a triangle formed between each thumb and index finger. Place each index finger in its triangle from the distal side and continue the twisting of the hands (toward the body, then down, then out) at the same time releasing the little fingers. If the thumbs and index fingers are not kept well apart the figure will be narrow. I suggested to the Indians that this was the dry season. They laughingly agreed but I do not think they had thought of it before as they immediately made wet and dry season rivers for each other. This figure is exactly like "Osage diamonds" of Mrs. Jayne but it is arrived at in a very different way and the interpretation is different.¹ Crickety called it Pis, or river.

STAR.

Position 1. The next step is a variation of opening A in that the index fingers take up the palmar strings from the distal side instead of from the

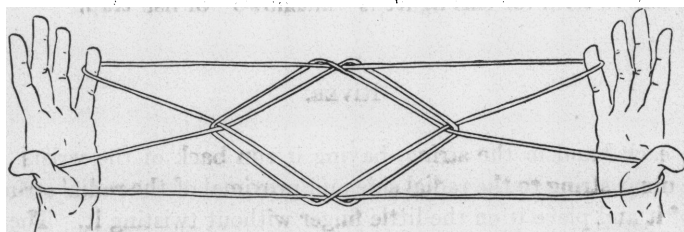


Fig. 11. A Star.

¹ String Figures, 24.

proximal. Reaching between the strings of the index loops from the distal side, pull the thumb loops off the thumbs, between the strings of the index loops and replace them on the thumbs. Treat the index loops the same way by reaching between the strings of the thumb loops; also the little finger loops by reaching between the strings of the index loops. Release the index loops and separate the hands (Fig. 11).

FLY.

Have one loop over each thumb, the strings running directly between the thumbs. Twist the left hand so that the two strings run along the dorsal surface and pass to the right from the ulnar side. With the right little

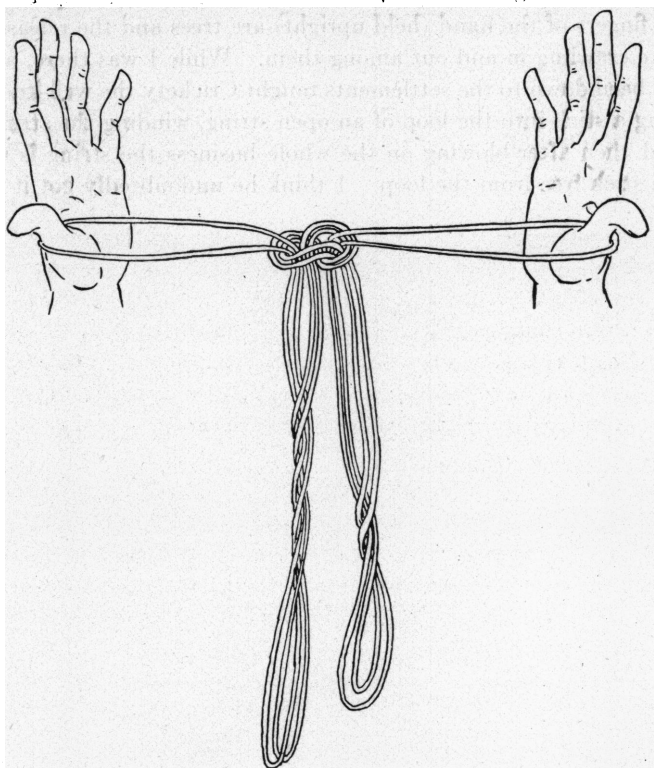


Fig. 12. A Fly.

finger reach behind the left hand on the radial side and take up both strings on the back of the finger. Return to position. With the little finger of

the left hand reach over (distal of) the strings running to the right little finger and take up the strings running to the right thumb on the dorsum of the finger. Return to position.

Raise the left wrist loop free of the hand and separating the hands, slowly draw it into a knot about midway between the hands. This is the fly (Toolik). The wings are now dropped by releasing the little fingers (Fig. 12). Try to catch the fly by slapping the hands together but when you separate them (quickly and as far as possible), the fly is gone.

This may be called a "trick" rather than a string figure. Crickety also knew the "hanging" trick although he used his feet instead of his head as is usually done. However, the trick he seemed to enjoy most was "warum" or "snake." It is the widely distributed "mouse." His explanation was that the fingers of the hand (held upright) are trees and the released string is a snake crawling in and out among them. While I was there, an Indian who had been down to the settlements taught Crickety the well-known trick of putting a stick into the loop of an open string, winding the string on the stick and then after blowing on the whole business the string is unwound with the stick free from the loop. I think he undoubtedly got it from the negroes.

(Continued from 2nd p. of cover.)

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