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STRING FIGURES

OFTEN KNOWN COLLOQUIALLY AS CAT'S CRADLES

String figures are a world-wide recreation which in its finest examples approach an art form. The patterns or representations are made with a closed loop of string, plaited hair or other medium of varying lengths using hands, neck and occasionally both teeth and toes as auxiliary aids.

The objects portrayed are very diverse and the variety of manipulations required to make them are seemingly endless resulting in literally thousands being recorded in drawings or photographs. It would be hard to find a single area, tribe or community in which they are not made or known to have been made; while different areas are found to use different construction techniques, the Pacific Islands constituting a distinctly defined area of its own, in sharp contrast to those in the peripheral regions around.

Some figures require two players while others are serials and proceed from figure to figure. Many of the designs represent persons, birds or fish; or every day things such as a well, canoe or a bed.

Historically, string figures were known to exist in early and medieval Europe, but the first mention in the Pacific was by Captain Bligh in his Log of the Bounty, where he said that he saw the children of Tahiti 'taking a piece of line in a variety of shapes off one of the other's hands'.

Anthropologists often spoke of them in their cultural descriptions and occasionally photographed the final figures, but nothing could be done to enable others to make them until Professors Rivers and Haddon in 1905 devised an anatomically based method of describing the construction of string figures in the Torres Strait Islands. This has been universally adopted for use in general, regional and local works which by now amount to many hundred, though a few

For the Pacific Islands there are now published monographs on the figures of almost every island group in Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia, as well as many of the tribal areas in New Guinea and Australia. These have resulted in the identification of particular construction techniques favoured by islanders and named, such as The Murray Opening in Torres Strait, Tao and Ta on Tikopia and The Caroline Extension in Micronesia.

String figure enthusiasts are now greatly helped by the foundation of the International String Figure Association whose headquarters are in Pasadena, California, which publish annual and quarterly serials and works such as Tom Storer's String Figure Bibliography.

Would be beginners in this fascinating game can commence their studies in confidence by reading such books as the classic 'String Figures for Beginners' or one of a dozen more recently published books for the novice.

Unit 42
11 Namatjira Drive
WESTON ACT 2611
(06) 288 0121

13 January, 1997

Kate Fortune
Executive Editor
Division of Pacific and Asian History
Australian National University
CANBERRA ACT 0200

Dear Kate

Re: Encyclopaedia of the Pacific Islands
String Figures

In response to your letter of 14 October, 1996, I enclose
the article that you requested.

Yours sincerely

Honor Maude

Ans. by phone - accepting.

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Editor:

Brij V Lal

Executive Editor:

Kate Fortune

Office:

Division of Pacific and Asian History, Australian National University

14 October 1996

Mrs Honor Maude
11 Namatjira Drive
Weston ACT 2611

Dear Honor (if I may)

Re: *Encyclopaedia of the Pacific Islands*

I am writing to invite your participation in this ambitious project, details of which are attached. I have just been appointed as Executive Editor, and am now based at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University. An editorial advisory board has been engaged for many months in planning contributions from a wide range of writers, and we hope to make steady progress from now on.

Your name has been suggested, because of your expertise in the area proposed as your topic, and it is very much hoped that you might be willing to provide an entry for the Encyclopaedia on 'Use of String figures in Pacific cultures' (to appear in Part 7 'Pacific Arts' of Section Seven, 'Culture'). We are looking for a summary of about 500 words which will explain the cultural and historical role of this art form in the Pacific. If you are in a position to assist us, your deadline is 31 January 1997. For the proposed multimedia version of the Encyclopaedia on CD-ROM especially, we would be interested in knowing what film, video and photographic material might be available on the topic.

Full acknowledgement of all contributing writers will be made with each entry and in the preface. There is no remuneration being offered to writers, although a significant discount will be offered on the purchase price.

I do hope that you will join us in this project. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Kate Fortune
Executive Editor

Division of Pacific and Asian History, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200
Tel: 61-6 249 4247 Fax: 61-6 249 5525 EMail: kfortune@coombs.anu.edu.au

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Editor:

Dr Brij V Lal, Division of Pacific and Asian History at the Australian National University, Canberra.

This project will provide, in an authoritative and readable printed volume and a subsequent multimedia CD-ROM, the most important information about Pacific Islands life, institutions and cultural experience. The ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS will be scholarly in approach, broadly based, attractively presented and elegantly written. The text will use the ordinary language of intelligent discourse to reach a wide audience. More than filling a gap, this volume will take the world of the Pacific to as wide a readership as possible.

An international Editorial Board (see over) will advise on and support the preparation of this volume. Contributions from acknowledged experts in every field of Pacific Islands scholarship will ensure that the volume reflects the diversity, accuracy and latest directions of research, as well as the actual lived experiences of contemporary Pacific Island peoples. The features of the volume include commissioned essays on overarching themes and issues, shorter expository entries on conceptual and theoretical approaches and brief notes on events, people, places, flora and fauna, and real and assumed Pacific icons and images. The content will range from factual and informative, to interpretative and futures perspectives.

The material will be arranged and presented under seven broad headings: Physical Environment, Peoples, History, Politics, Economics, Society, and Culture. Country Profiles will provide basic data on language, currency, population, services and utilities, government and communication. Photographic essays will enhance relevant topics. A section on Island Lives will feature biographies in which key Pacific Island leaders and personalities reflect on their lives and experiences, and discuss their own Pacific identity. Extensive contents listings, thorough indexing and brief guides to further reading will ensure that readers are provided with every assistance.

The ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS is a joint publishing venture by the Pasifika Press of Auckland and the University of Hawaii Press of Honolulu. It is located in the Division of Pacific and Asian History at the Australian National University in Canberra.

Correspondence to: Kate Fortune, Division of Pacific and Asian History

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia

Tel: 61-6 249 4247 Fax: 61-6 249 5525 Email: kfortune@coombs.anu.edu.au

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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Correspondence to: Kate Fortune, Executive Editor, Encyclopaedia of the Pacific Islands
RSPAS, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
Tel: 61-6 249 4247 *Fax:* 61-6 249 5525 *EMail:* kfortune@coombs.anu.edu.au

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