

F.D. McCarthy's String Figures from Yirrkala: a Museum Perspective

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ABSTRACT. In 1948 F.D. McCarthy collected 196 string figures in the course of the American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land. This paper presents an account of the current status of this collection, together with a catalogue to supplement McCarthy's published data.

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The Australian Museum houses one of the most extensive ethnological collections of Aboriginal material culture. In the middle of 1988 I attempted to list miscellaneous items unregistered in this collection. Such objects were left aside by former registrars because of lack of documentation, and were waiting for conservation treatment or were simply forgotten. Among those objects was a wooden box containing 196 string figures which were collected by F.D. McCarthy at Yirrkala in 1948. This is probably the largest, well-documented collection of Aboriginal string figures in Australia (Meehan, personal communication, 1989). Because of the outstanding historical and ethnological value of this collection I decided to bring it to the attention of other anthropologists.

The Collection

F.D. McCarthy collected string figures at Yirrkala as a member of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. His comprehensive and richly-illustrated study was published in the second volume produced by the expedition members

(McCarthy, 1960). In the opening chapter entitled 'The story of the expedition', Mountford (1956:xxx) stated that after study, the ethnological collections made by the expedition would be divided between scientific institutions in the United States of America and Australia, but no inventory of items was published indicating which were to go to the US or which were to remain in Australia. The entire collection of string figures, however, stayed in the Australian Museum, where it remained unregistered until 1988. This has made the collection not only inaccessible but effectively unknown.

There are three major records of the Yirrkala string figures kept in the Australian Museum: i) the string figures themselves mounted on the cardboard or brown paper on which various field notes are made (Figs 1,2); ii) 185 photographs (archive numbers V8960-V8964) showing figure makers during their performances and sometimes different stages of the figure making (Figs 3,4); and iii) a photocopy of McCarthy's field book, which opens with the enthusiastic statement 'I began collecting string figures as soon as we reached Yirrkalla' (McCarthy, 1948).

The collection consists of 196 string figures which were mounted on thin cardboard or brown paper (45.5 x 19 cm) with tiny strips of adhesive tape, now 40 years old. The dried tape is now peeling off, endangering the existence of the figures. All mounted figures were slotted vertically into a wooden box. The cardboard and brown paper not only support the figures but also contain the most immediate field records. They are valuable, integral parts of the collection. The standard data recorded on them consist of: i) number: some string figures are identified by additional letters (e.g., 173A-C), and some numbers were missing (65, 93-97, 129, 139, 151, 152); ii) name in English; iii) Aboriginal name in a Pama-Nyungan family language; iv) maker's name; and v) geographical attribution.

The following data are also occasionally present: vi) sketch and note of the position of hands, thumbs and fingers holding the string figure; vii) description of parts of the figure; viii) notes of techniques used in making the figure; ix) technical, topical or other associations between different figures; and x) sketch of the object represented by the figure.

Figures are mounted on only one side of the paper sheets, but often on both sides of the cardboard. Sometimes two or three figures are mounted on one surface. All the notes were made with lead pencil while the numbers assigned to the figures are

traced over in ink.

Treatment of the Collection

Soon after locating the string figures I began work on their documentation and registration within the Australian Museum system, and was faced with several problems such as the physical handling of the objects, writing of registration numbers on them, and improving conditions for their preservation. For conservation advice I approached Ms Gina Drummond, then a conservator in the Museum's Division of Materials Conservation. She recommended 'Archive Text' labels, which is an acid-free paper, and permanent black ink for registration numbers. The labels can then be attached to the mounting boards with 'Japanese Wheat' starch agent. This starch has little effect on the mounting boards and can easily be removed. The mounting boards with label(s) made for each string figure are slotted into plastic sleeves and sealed.

Ms Drummond also suggested that the sticky tape strips holding string figures should not be replaced with new ones until proper conservation work is undertaken on the collection. As an emergency measure in some cases, however, I decided to stick a fresh strip of tape to prevent several figures from falling apart.

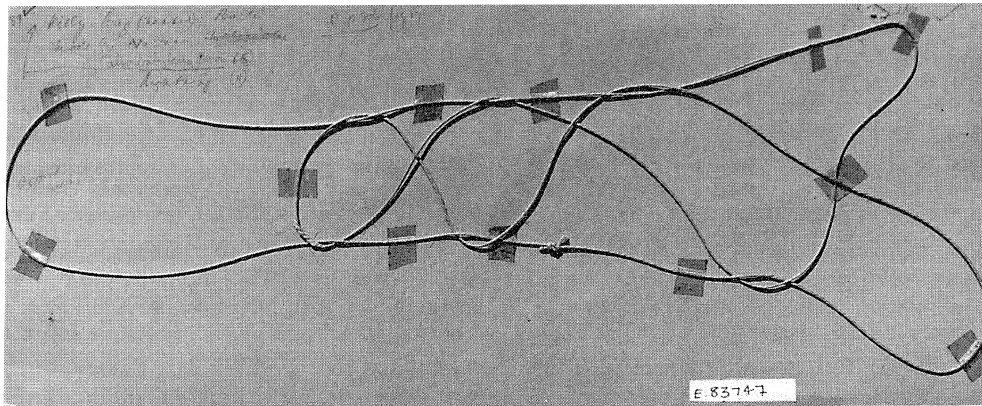


Fig.1 'Dilly bag' string figure.

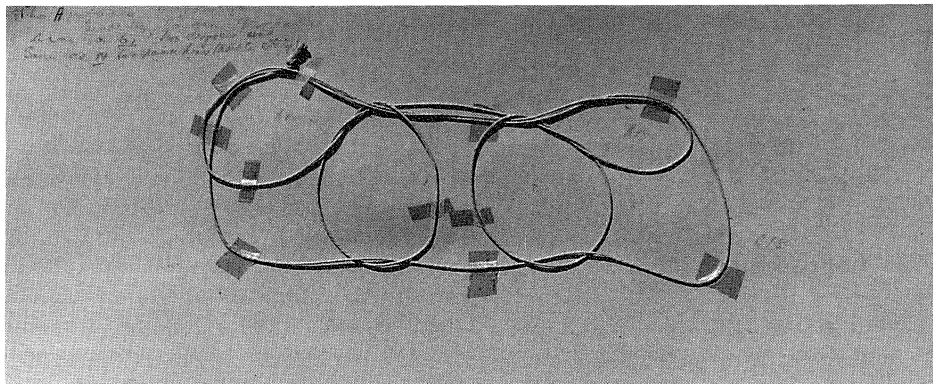


Fig.2 'Two armbands' string figure.

Collection Documentation

In the first stage of registration a list of the string figures was made (Appendix, Table 1). This contains McCarthy's field number, maker's name, English title and Aboriginal name for each figure, and the registration number assigned (the prefix E indicates the anthropological collection of the Australian Museum). Where a maker's name is in parentheses, these indicate that the name is not recorded on the mounting board.

The figure numbers written on the mounting board do not match those given in McCarthy's article (1960:433-438) and Table 1 (Appendix) here refers only to the field numbers found on the mounting boards. The actual figures, however, may be easily identified with those listed and illustrated in the article. The titles of the figure also differ sometimes between the field records and the McCarthy article mentioned above.

The Aboriginal names of the figures are also listed on Table 1 (Appendix). There are some spelling variations between the field records and published material. Most of the string figures, however, have the Aboriginal titles providing material of potential historical value for linguists. Three of the 196 string figures are concerned with Macassans. One of them (no. 105) shows a Macassan man, another (no. 43) a Macassan prahu, and the third (no. 10) a Macassan prahu with mast and ropes. Macassan fishermen came to the shores of Arnhem Land until the turn of the century (Australia, 1975:11; Mulvaney, 1989:22) and in 1948 some people still remembered them.

One theory on the origin of string figures in Arnhem Land preferred by Davidson (1941) suggests that the art of making them was introduced to the Aboriginal people from outside, presumably by the Macassans. McCarthy (1960), on the other hand, subscribed to the theory of a local origin. For this paper, however, it is not of much

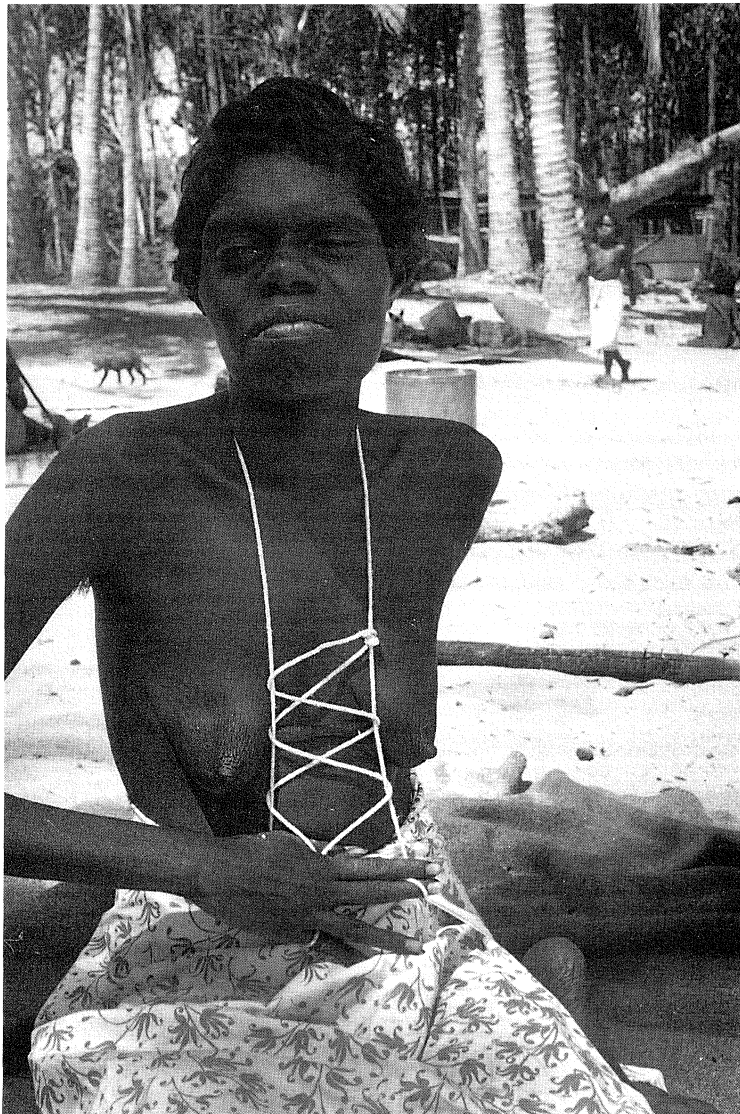


Fig.3 Narau demonstrating the 'dilly bag' string figure.



Fig.4 Narau demonstrating the 'two armbands' string figure.

importance which theory is closer to the truth. In this century Arnhem Land Aboriginal cultures have undergone many changes and transformations, especially in the last four decades (Australia, 1975:11-13). In the process of this transformation the art of string figure making was also modified. This is well illustrated in McCarthy's collection by two almost identical figures which show two large circles accompanied by small loops. One figure is named 'Two armbands' (no. 81), while the other is called 'Two pannikins' (no. 14). In this context of change, McCarthy's collection is even more valuable and precious.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. I would like to thank Betty Meehan and Rhys Jones for their advice and encouragement which helped me to transform a casual story of a registrar's discovery into a more consistent report. Also I wish to thank Yvonne Jones for photography (Figs 1,2) and Cathy Vicari for help in drafting the text. Figures 3 and 4 were printed from F.D. McCarthy's original negatives by the Photography section of the Australian Museum.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. String figures from Yirrkala. Women – Narau, Bali, Bungara, Daku, Djunbia, Asella; men – Derdenga, Mitali, Matarman, Wondjuk; names in brackets – brackets indicate that the name is not written on the mounting board.

Field no.	Maker	Title	Aboriginal name	Registration no.
1	Narau	Boobook owl	Buk buk	E.83660
2	Daku	Rakai	–	E.83661
3	Narau	White hawk	Ngak ngak	E.83662
4	Narau	Frog in a billabong	Garukman	E.83663
5	Bungara	Buffalo	Gubbabunga	E.83664
6	Bali	Stone tomahawk	–	E.83665
7	Narau	Devil	Morkoi	E.83666
8	Narau	Bandicoot	Wuntgura	E.83667
9	Narau	Brown hawk	Karakai	E.83668
10	Narau	Mast of Macassan prahu	Balura or guku	E.83669
10A	Narau	Long slender root food	Dungurak	E.83732
11	Narau	Lightning	Bapi	E.83670
12	Narau	Morning star	Baurmbirr	E.83671
13	Narau	Dugout canoe	Liva liva	E.83672
14	Narau	Two pannikins	Rupa	E.83673
15	Narau	Crab	Gunjan	E.83674
16	Djunbia	Scissors	No nabwe nowe	E.83675
17	Narau	Parrot-fish	Alallu	E.83676
18	Narau	Baby being born	–	E.83677
19	Narau	Parrot-fish	–	E.83678
20	Narau	Baby born	–	E.83679
21	Bungara	Butterfly	Bornba	E.83680
22	Narau	Mangrove bird	Warata	E.83681
23	Narau	Four dingo puppies	–	E.83682
24	Narau	Two dingoes	Wungan	E.83683
25	Bali	Two dingoes	Wungan	E.83684
26	Narau	Sun	Walu	E.83685
27	Narau	Crocodile	Baru	E.83686
28	Narau	Emu's eggs	Malui-jalonga	E.83687
29	Derdenga	Man and woman copulating	–	E.83688
30	Bali	Opossum	Maringa-au	E.83689
31	Narau	Native companion	Gurdjur	E.83690
32	Narau	Stingray and two young ones	–	E.83691
33	Bali	Leech in rakia swamp	–	E.83692
34	Narau	White man	–	E.83693
35	Narau	Spider	Gar	E.83694
36	Bali	Mangrove crab	Juka	E.83695
37	Bungara	Catfish	Berikoko	E.83696
38	Narau	Flying fox	Matjur	E.83697
39	Narau	Boomerang	Kale wali	E.83698
40	Narau	Bird with blue short legs	Bromiley Kite-wabola	E.83699
41	Daku	Sea eagle catching fish	Wurula	E.83700
42	Narau	Gecko	Munungari	E.83701
43	Bali	Prahu	Mibiunga	E.83702
44	Narau	Iron	Dakul	E.83703
44A	Narau	Dead man	–	E.83751
45	Bali	Two emus	Kadbarait	E.83704
46	Bungara	Three houses	Bala	E.83705
47	Narau	Frill-necked lizard	–	E.83708
48	Bungara	Twined basket	Bulpu	E.83707
49	Narau	Goanna	Wurtgau-ul	E.83706
50	Narau	–	Gabira malui	E.83709
51	Narau	Caterpillar crawling on twig	Tap-pal	E.83710
52	Narau	Three locusts in a tree	Kara-jerinnja	E.83711
53	Narau/Djunbia	Sword fish	Waruka	E.83712
54	(Narau)	Moon fish	Tapi tapi	E.83713
55	Derdenga	Four yams	Gidama	E.83714
56	Bali	Sugar bag in tree	Gara pun	E.83715

Field no.	Maker	Title	Aboriginal name	Registration no.
57	Narau	Two shovel spears	Kai-it	E.83716
58	Djunbia	Spindle	Jekini	E.83717
59	Mitali	Dugong	Dju-nong-goi-jung-ung	E.83718
60	Narau/Bali	Opossum ina hole in a tree	—	E.83719
61	Narau	Two dingoes	Wungan	E.83720
62	Bali	Parrot	Dum-mala	E.83721
63A	Mitali	Stingray	Au-ul-kalla	E.83722
64	Narau	Two waterholes	Naringa	E.83723
66	Narau	Fire sticks	Djudji	E.83724
67	Bungara	Pregnant woman	Gungman	E.83725
68	(Narau)	Big 'calico' on man	Naga dormalla	E.83726
69	Bali	Yam	Cungori	E.83727
70	Djunbia	Clam shell	Bunba	E.83728
71	Narau	Tortoise	Bukkara	E.83729
72	Djunbia	White man	—	E.83730
72A	Narau	Root like potato	Malnge	E.83748
73	Daku	Crayfish	Dungurung	E.83731
74	(Narau)	Granite boulders	Gunda	E.83753
75	Narau	Freshwater goanna	Rejoy	E.83733
76	Narau	Two conch shells	Dju-la-kur	E.83734
77	(Narau)	Billabong	Gapukulin	E.83735
78	(Narau)	Freshwater goanna	Amaeowa	E.83736
79	Narau	Root food	Buargul	E.83737
80	Djunbia	Rat	Nik nik	E.83738
81	Narau	Two armbands	Darowirra	E.83739
82	Bali	Knife	Mound-jo-uk	E.83740
83	Narau	Stingray-spine spear	Warugal	E.83741
84	Djunbia	Waterhole	Naringa	E.83742
85	Asella	Waterhole or billabong	—	E.83743
86	Bali	Parrot-fish	Lalu	E.83744
87	Naru	Two men spearing a stingray	—	E.83745
88	Narau	Tortoise	Balagbirr	E.83746
89	Narau	Dilly bag	Bati	E.83747
90	Djunbia	Kookaburra	Karapol	E.83748
91	Narau	Goanna	Munongani	E.83749
92	Djunbia	Rain	Waluka	E.83750
98	Narau	Butterfly	Bounba	E.83756
99	Narau	Two sea-hawk nests with young	—	E.83757
100	Narau	Ironwood wax	Galanjin	E.83758
101	Narau	Bandicoot	Wurtgura	E.83759
102	Narau	Waterhole or billabong	Kapu	E.83760
103	Bali	Crab-hole	Naringa	E.83761
104	Narau	Bark container	Waitjamindi	E.83762
105	Narau	Makassar man	—	E.83763
106	Narau	Two bamboos	Jiragir	E.83764
107	Narau	Emu track	Luku	E.83765
108	Narau	Kangaroo track	Mudbia luku	E.83754
109	Narau	Man's track	Jurlu luku	E.83766
110	Narau	White man's shoes	Dapadung	E.83767
111	Narau	'Piggy piggy'	—	E.83768
112	—	Two bottles	—	E.83769
113	Narau	Kangaroo	Mudbia	E.83770
114	Narau	Kingfisher	Djerrakarama	E.83771
115	Narau	Ant	Kal kal	E.83772
116	Narau	Wallaby's intestine	—	E.83774
116A	Narau	Dogs	Wungan	E.83773
117	Narau	Ant's legs	Kal kal	E.83775
118	Narau	Drone-tube	Iraki	E.83776
119	Narau	Spearthrower	Mangal	E.83777
120	Narau	Forehead band	Werumbulla	E.83778
121	—	Fish net	Walakwi	E.83779
122	Narau	Cross shoulder strap	Maitka	E.83780
123	—	Running creek	Kapu	E.83781
124	—	Clouds	Mangan	E.83782

Field no.	Maker	Title	Aboriginal name	Registration no.
125	Narau	Man sitting down	Nin-na	E.83783
126	Bali	House	Bala	E.83784
126A	Narau	Faeces	Kula	E.83752
127	-	Centipede	Djerrtum	E.83785
128	-	Scorpion	Butungum	E.83786
130	-	Man lying down	Jukura	E.83787
131	-	Little boy standing on one leg	Gurok-ka	E.83788
132	Narau	Three women	Lurusun	E.83789
132A	Narau	Three women sitting down	Larusan	E.83789
133	Narau	Two women fighting	Buma	E.83790
134	-	Crow flying	Waak waak	E.83791
135	Bali	Two boys	Marama	E.83792
136	Narau	Crow walking	Waak waak	E.83793
137	Narau	Vulva of a woman	-	E.83794
138	Narau	Two vulvas	Nukun	E.83795
140	-	Bee	Karinjinji	E.83796
141	-	Snail	Mandung	E.83797
142	-	Female wallaby	Wirdi	E.83798
143	-	Tree roots	Katul	E.83799
144	-	Girl pounding rakai	Mungan	E.83800
145	-	Stilt	Girrt girrt	E.83801
146	-	Dog running	Wandil	E.83802
147	-	Woman's breasts	Dajlinging	E.83803
148	-	Anus	Bundji	E.83755
149	-	Man throwing spear	Duktun	E.83804
150	-	Wooden spear	Kai-it	E.83805
150A	-	Three fresh-water snakes	Bapi	E.83806
152	-	Interwined snakes	Djerramunga	E.83807
153A	-	Shelled cycad nut	Diku	E.83849
153B	-	Cooking cycad nut	Batun	E.83808
153C	-	'Rangga' cycad nut tree	Bukulumbak	E.83850
154A	-	Sea-gull	Ngurula	E.83809
154B	-	Egg	Mapu	E.83851
155	-	Octopus	Monda	E.83810
156	-	Coral with hole for octopus	Garung	E.83811
157	-	Goose	Guramatji	E.83812
158	-	Pigmy goose	Gunmingjingu	E.83813
159	-	Big blue bird	Djulidjiluka	E.83814
160	(Narau)	Paperbark head cover	Lipa	E.83815
161	-	Calico sarong	Momendue	E.83816
162	(Narau)	Camp	Ngaijir	E.83817
163	(Narau)	Menstrual blood of 3 women	Urungal	E.83818
164	(Narau)	Diving duck	Wurun	E.83819
165	Bali	Two nail-fish	Kung ngal	E.83820
166	(Narau)	Mangrove crab	Gwi-ita	E.83821
167	(Narau)	Fishing line & hook	Rukki	E.83822
168	(Narau)	Brass cannon	Batali	E.83823
169	Narau	Porcupine killed by stilt	Djerramarga	E.83824
170	(Narau)	Coffin on platform	Djunba	E.83825
171	(Narau)	Penis and vulva	-	E.83826
172	(Narau)	Fish-traps	Towurr	E.83827
173C	(Wondjuk)	Mythical snake	Garanungu	E.83828
173A	(Narau)	Wawilaki sisters standing up	-	E.83829
173B	(Narau)	Mythical snake	Garanungu	E.83830
174	(Narau)	Circumcision	Madili	E.83831
175	(Narau)	Cicatrice	Kaimarriki	E.83832
176	(Narau)	Coconut	Kabaru	E.83833
177	(Narau)	Bark coffin	Dundba	E.83834
178	(Narau)	Coconut palm	Kabaru	E.83835
179	(Narau)	Pawpaw tree with fruit	-	E.83836
180	(Narau)	Cassava	-	E.83837
181	(Narau)	Cassava	Bawung	E.83838
182	(Narau)	Two bananas	-	E.83839
183	Wondjuk	Two women carrying dilly bags	-	E.83840

Field no.	Maker	Title	Aboriginal name	Registration no.
184	Wondjuk	Little boomerang	Gunjalili	E.83841
185	Wondjuk	Woman menstruating	–	E.83842
186	(Narau)	Diving ducks	Warun	E.83843
187	Wondjuk	Tree for diving ducks	Jimbil-lika	E.83844
188	Wondjuk	Crocodile	Nau	E.83845
189	(Narau)	Two bats	Wingi wingi	E.83846
190	(Narau)	Native cat	Borokuma	E.83847

F.D. McCarthy, Commemorative Papers (Archaeology, Anthropology, Rock Art)

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