

String Figures

String Figures

A Cultural Practice between Art,
Anthropology, and Theory

Edited by Mario Schulze and Sarine Waltenspül

DIAPHANES

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Exhibiting Colonial Entanglements

String Figures and Material Metaphors

On comprend enfin que les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que “bonnes à manger” mais parce que “bonnes à penser.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le totémisme aujourd’hui*

It matters what ideas we think other ideas with [...]

Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*

It matters what matter we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots [...] what ties tie ties.

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

In the early 1960s, discussing totemism, that most anthropological of subjects, Claude Lévi-Strauss made the observation that certain animal species came to be totemic for Indigenous groups, not because they were “good to eat,” but because they were “good to think.”¹ The analogical way in which people understand and are able to reflect upon abstract concepts such as relatedness through aspects of “the sensible world” rendered in “sensible terms”—what Lévi-Strauss termed “the science of the concrete”²—might otherwise be described as the operation of “material metaphor.”³ The means by which we live, think and act are fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and metaphors drawn from the tangible, material world around us—our bodies, architecture, environments,

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Merlin Press, 1964), p. 89.

2 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

3 Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

technologies and, indeed, animal species —structure our perception, understanding and action.⁴

Material things, then, are good to think with. But it is important to recognize that these things are not inert matter. They have agency. They shape our thoughts and actions, and our thoughts and actions act back upon the world, giving shape to the world in turn. The material things we think with are consequential, they are implicated in our actions. As Donna Haraway argues in *Staying with the Trouble*: “It matters what matter we use to think other matters with.”⁵

In this essay, I explore the motif of the string figure as a material metaphor for thinking about how differently-positioned actors are differently entangled in histories of colonialism and its legacies. I draw upon a research and exhibition project—*[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times*—in which my colleagues and I explored the affordances of the colonial anthropological archive to interrogate the coloniality of the archive itself, and considered whether such archives also afford the possibility of “thinking decoloniality” – thinking, that is, “other ideas,” and telling “other stories” than those for which the archive was assembled and which it was intended to serve.⁶ Over the past few years, *[Re:]Entanglements* has pursued a sustained re-engagement with the archival legacies of a series of anthropological surveys that were conducted, between 1909 and 1915, in what were then the British protectorates of Southern Nigeria

4 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

5 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 12.

6 *[Re:]Entanglements* is the public-facing name of the project “Museum Affordances: Activating West African Ethnographic Archives and Collections through Experimental Museology.” The project was initially based at SOAS University of London and the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and involved multiple collaborations with individuals and organizations in the UK, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. It was funded between 2018 and 2021 by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/P014615/1). Our participation in the *String Figures / Fadenspiele* exhibition at Museum Tinguely resulted from an invitation to contribute to the interdisciplinary workshop on string figures organized by Sarine Waltenspül, Mario Schulze and Mareile Flitsch at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich in June 2023. For further details about *[Re:]Entanglements*, please see the project website <https://re-entanglements.net> (accessed November 19, 2024).

and Sierra Leone. These historical anthropological materials comprise large collections of artefacts, sound recordings, botanical specimens, field notes, publications, as well as thousands of images, including fifteen photographs of string figures taken in the Nigerian towns of Agukwu Nri and Ebenebe (fig. 1).

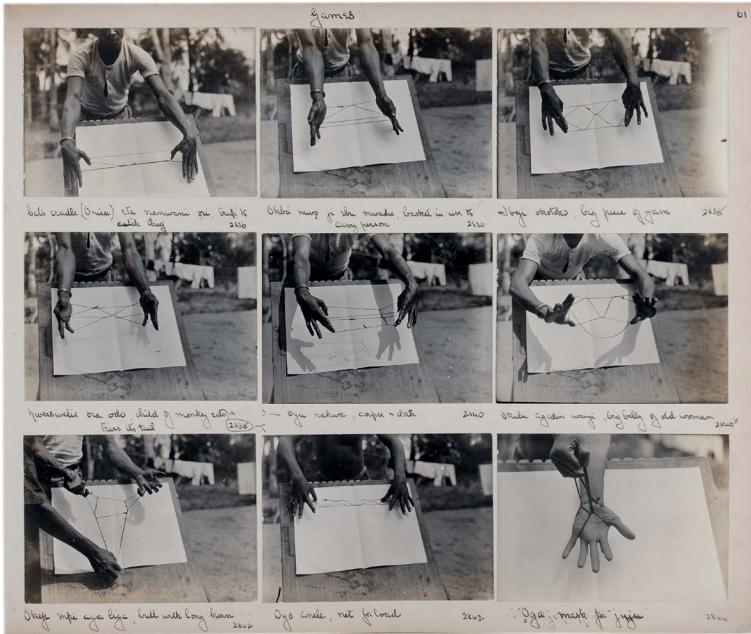


Fig. 1: A page from one of the official photograph albums of N. W. Thomas's anthropological surveys of the Igbo-speaking peoples of Southern Nigeria, 1910-1913. Thomas's photographs of string figures are mounted in a section on games, together with captions providing the Igbo name for each figure and English translation.

Anthropology and the Comparative Study of String Figures

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, anthropology emerged as a science dedicated to the holistic study of humankind, with the notion of cross-cultural comparison at its heart. As such, anthropologists were interested in local manifestations and understandings of seemingly universal practices. While their main focus was on social organization, and on customs and rites relating to the human life course (birth, puberty, marriage, death, etc.), anthropologists of the era were also fascinated by what might appear to be more trivial matters, including the apparently ubiquitous popular pastime of string games—the making

of string figures or cat's cradles. As the pioneering British anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon wrote in 1906:

In Ethnology, as in other sciences, nothing is too insignificant to receive attention [...] To the casual observer few amusements offer, at first sight, a less promising field for research than does the simple cat's cradle of our childhood; and, indeed, it is only when the comparative method is applied to it that we begin to discover that it, too, has a place in the culture history of man.⁷

Haddon encountered the game during his 1888 visit to the islands of the Torres Strait (the channel between northern Australia and New Guinea). He observed that the Torres Strait string figures were much more elaborate than those he recalled from his own childhood in England. He also noted that they were more often made by a single "player," rather than two, and that the game was by no means only played by children. He collected examples of completed figures, which he mounted on boards and subsequently donated to the British Museum.⁸

Haddon continued to document string games when he returned to the Torres Strait in 1898 as leader of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition. With William H. R. Rivers, he formalized a "method for recording string figures" and published this in the anthropological journal *Man* in 1902.⁹ Rivers and Haddon stressed the need to document the various stages of making each figure, rather than merely photographing, drawing or even collecting the completed figures. They proposed a nomenclature for describing the various steps and actions involved in each string figure, and their system has been adopted by many subsequent researchers, including Caroline Furness Jayne in her 1906 book *String Figures: A Study of Cat's Cradle in Many Lands*.

7 Alfred C. Haddon, "Introduction," in Caroline Furness Jayne, *String Games: A Study of Cat's-Cradle in Many Lands* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. xi.

8 Dinah Eastop, "Playing with Haddon's String Figures," *Textile* 5 (2007), pp. 190–205.

9 W. H. R. Rivers and A. C. Haddon, "A Method of Recording String Figures and Tricks," *Man* 2 (1902), pp. 146–153.

Anthropology's Colonial Entanglements

With such seemingly innocuous interests as comparing string games in different regions, one might be forgiven for concluding that anthropology was the benign pursuit of antiquarians and folklorists. We know, however, that the discipline has been thoroughly entangled in colonialism throughout much of its history. Its efforts, as Talal Asad notes, “were devoted to a description and analysis—carried out by Europeans, for a European audience—of non-European societies dominated by European power.”¹⁰ This entanglement in colonialism had both ideological and practical dimensions. Ideologically, anthropological theories of racialized social hierarchies justified the subjugation of so-called “primitive” peoples, perceived to be at earlier stages of cultural evolution, in the name of civilization and Christianity. The collection of material culture from far-flung outposts of empire, and its display in ethnographic museums in metropolitan centers, served to illustrate such evolutionary schema and reinforce white European senses of supremacy at the apex of the “culture history of man” invoked by Haddon. The legacies of these evolutionary ways of understanding and narrating difference are evident in contemporary discourses of “modernity” and “development,” and in the persistence of racialized social injustices in which it is evident that some lives are considered to matter more than others.

There were other, more practical, ways in which anthropology was enmeshed in the colonial project. The gathering of intelligence and production of knowledge about colonized peoples became an important task supporting different modes of indirect rule or “native administration” in colonial governance. In many cases, it was anthropologists themselves who lobbied government, arguing for the value of their nascent discipline in fulfilling this task. In Britain, this was the impetus that led to the establishment of anthropological training at universities, such as at Oxford and Cambridge, which were already recruiting grounds for the colonial services. The posited “practical value” of the disci-

10 Talal Asad, “Introduction,” in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, ed. Talal Asad (New York: Humanity Books, 1973), p. 15.

pline also resulted in the creation of the role of the “Government Anthropologist”—trained anthropologists employed by colonial authorities for the express purpose of investigating the “customs and laws” of colonial subjects so that they might be more effectively governed.

The first such government anthropologist to be appointed by the British Colonial Office was Northcote Whitridge Thomas (1868–1936), and it was in this official capacity that Thomas led the anthropological surveys in Southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone that have been the focus of the *[Re:]Entanglements* project. Whether Thomas’s services helped or hindered British colonial governance in West Africa is a moot point and an issue I have discussed at length elsewhere.¹¹ A close examination of Thomas’s short career as a government anthropologist lends credence to Asad’s argument that it is a gross simplification to condemn anthropology as “being merely the handmaiden of colonialism.”¹² But it would also be misleading to suggest that anthropologists were necessarily vociferous critics of the colonial order. The nature of the discipline’s implicatedness was, rather, one of profound contradiction and ambiguity.¹³

Such tensions are apparent in correspondence between Thomas and his employers in colonial government. Continual doubt is expressed concerning the value of Thomas’s anthropological work, and, on more than one occasion, he had to be reminded to prioritize work of a practical nature, rather than pursue purely scientific research. Some of what strike us today as the most “colonial” forms of anthropological objectification—for instance, the production of hundreds of physical type photographs—were quite irrelevant to colonial administrators, who were more interested in understanding local political structures. Similarly, Thomas’s documentation of other aspects of everyday life, including the fifteen photographs of string figures taken during his 1910–1911 tour in what was then Awka District (today Anambra State), Nigeria, were considered to be of purely scien-

11 Paul Basu, “N. W. Thomas and Colonial Anthropology in British West Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (2015), pp. 84–107.

12 Asad, “Introduction,” p. 16.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

tific interest, confirming the opinion of Thomas's critics in the colonial service that these anthropological surveys were a waste of money.

Re-Engaging with the Anthropological Archive

The financially straitened conditions and changed priorities imposed by the First World War provided the excuse to bring Thomas's anthropological survey work to an end. Indicative of the colonial authorities' lack of interest in them, the assembled materials were dispersed to different institutions where they were effectively "shelved" and, for decades, largely forgotten.¹⁴ It is only in recent years that the value of this remarkably comprehensive anthropological archive has been recognized and, with the *[Re:]Entanglements* project, has become the focus of a major research and exhibition project. Given the unequivocality of its entanglement with colonial governmentality in West Africa, it provides an especially apposite body of material through which to consider the possible "decolonial affordances" of colonial collections.¹⁵ Through experimenting with multiple approaches to re-engaging with these collections, the project has attempted to better understand the "coloniality" of the materials, but also to consider whether (and, if so, how) they can transcend the colonial contexts in which they were collected and contribute to the making of "decolonial" futures for different stakeholders, for example through the recovery of marginalized histories and knowledges, or as inspiration for creative practice.¹⁶

14 Today, the archive is mainly housed in the following institutions: Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (artefact collections, photograph albums, photographic prints; documents); Cambridge University (field notes, manuscripts); Royal Anthropological Institute (photographic negatives, photograph registers); British Library (sound recordings); Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (sound recordings, artefact collections); UK National Archives (official correspondence, photograph albums); SOAS University of London (linguistic fieldnotes); National Museum, Lagos (photograph albums).

15 Paul Basu and Ferdinand de Jong, "Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances," *Social Anthropology* 24 (2016), pp. 5–19.

16 Paul Basu, "Remobilising Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times: Exploring the Latent Possibilities of N. W. Thomas's West African Collections," in *Mobile*

Having “rearticulated” the different parts of the archive held at different institutions, bringing sound, image, objects, field-notes and published texts back into relation with each other, an important part of *[Re:]Entanglements* was to reconstruct and then retrace the itineraries of the anthropological surveys, returning copies of photographs, sound recordings and pictures of artefacts to the locations in Nigeria and Sierra Leone where they were made or collected. It has been a great privilege to be able to give copies of Thomas’s photographic portraits to the descendants of those photographed and to share 110-year old sound recordings of their ancestors’ voices. Recognizing the different meanings and significance these materials possess for different stakeholders depending on their positionalities, we have also engaged with diasporic Nigerian and Sierra Leonean communities in the UK and elsewhere, as well as with those who have affective connections to the materials in other ways. Through workshops and commissions, we collaborated with West African artists, musicians and storytellers, exploring more creative and speculative methods for “telling other stories” through the archival materials.¹⁷

Exhibiting Entanglements

Exhibition-making was central to the *[Re:]Entanglements* project. This included setting up simple displays of archival photographs in public spaces in the towns and villages in Nigeria and Sierra Leone where the photographs had been originally taken, as well as collaboratively curating a series of exhibitions juxtaposing the creative responses of artists in Benin City, Nsukka and Lagos with the (largely photographic) archival materials they were respond-

Museums: Collections in Circulation, ed. Felix Driver, Mark Nesbitt and Caroline Cornish (London: UCL Press, 2021), pp. 44–70.

17 See, for example, *[Re:]Entanglements*, “Creative Engagements with the Archive,” May 30, 2019, <https://re-entanglements.net/creative-engagements>; Paul Basu, “Benin City: Colonial Archives, Creative Collaborations,” July 23, 2019, <https://re-entanglements.net/benin-creative-collaborations>; Paul Basu, “Colonial Indexicality,” October 8, 2019, <https://re-entanglements.net/colonial-indexicality>; Paul Basu, “[Re:]Entangled Traditions Exhibition, Nsukka,” March 25, 2020, <https://re-entanglements.net/nsukka-exhibition>; *[Re:]Entanglements*, “Mourning Clothes,” February 2, 2021, <https://re-entanglements.net/mourning-clothes> (all accessed June 21, 2024).

ing to.¹⁸ In 2021/2022, the project culminated in a year-long exhibition at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, where the bulk of Thomas’s material culture collections are housed. This exhibition, also entitled *[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times*, brought together a selection of the new works produced and previously displayed in West Africa, material selected from the historical collections, and a series of audio-visual installations, which had again resulted from different creative collaborations (fig. 2).¹⁹



Fig. 2: Installation views of the *[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times* exhibition, University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2021/2022. Note the red and grey vinyl designs covering the walls, derived from the string figures documented by N. W. Thomas.

The exhibition was not, however, primarily conceived as a means of disseminating the findings of the *[Re:]Entanglements* research project, nor merely as an opportunity to display the historical collections alongside contemporary creative responses. Rather, the exhibition was intended as a platform for extending our critical conversations around the legacies of colonial research and collecting practices to a more diverse range of stakeholders in the public forum of the museum. While contextual information was, of course, provided, the exhibition intentionally posed many

18 See <https://re-entanglements.net/exhibition> (accessed June 21, 2024)

19 Jean Borgatti, “[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times,” *Exhibition Review*, *African Arts* 56 (2023), pp. 82–83.

more questions than it answered, and, through its installations, audiences were invited to reflect, respond and participate in an ongoing discussion about the contemporary status and possibilities of these colonial histories and collections, and indeed reflect on the status of the ethnographic museum itself as an institution born of the colonial-anthropological nexus.

This was an enactment of a concept of exhibition as a site for the generation rather than reproduction of knowledge; exhibition as a “laboratory” for assembling objects, images, artworks, sounds, voices, texts, but also—crucially—people, with their different positionalities and perspectives, to explore together a difficult history and a challenging problem.²⁰ To reprise the propositions of Lévi-Strauss, Strathern and Haraway that I invoked at the start of this essay, the materials that we brought together in this exhibition experiment were precisely the ideas, the matter, the stories through which we hoped to elicit new ideas, new matters and new stories concerning the legacies of colonialism in the present. Our strategy was to construct the exhibition exclusively from materials drawn from, or created in response to, the archive of Northcote Thomas’s anthropological surveys; to “mine” this particular anthropological archive for “matter [...] to think other matters with.”²¹

Material Metaphors in a Colonial Collection

Metaphors are carriers of meaning and affect from one domain to another. While I have argued that the relationship between Thomas and the colonial power structures that supported his work was one of ambiguity, there is no denying that his anthropological surveys were conducted in the wake of the so-called “pacification” of the territories in which they took place. In Southern Nigeria,

20 See Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald, “Introduction: Experiments in Exhibition, Ethnography, Art, and Science,” in *Exhibition Experiments*, ed. Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 1–24.

21 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 12. I consciously invoke Fred Wilson’s seminal 1992 exhibition, “Mining the Museum,” at the Maryland Historical Society as a strategy for unsettling the conventions of museum display *through* the medium of museum display. See Lisa G. Corrin, “Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History,” *Curator* 36 (1993), pp. 302–313.

the period from 1890 to 1920 saw almost continual deployment of British colonial military force—euphemized as “patrols,” “operations,” and “expeditions”—against local polities in order to subdue them and bring them under British colonial “protection.”²² We might note, for example, that Thomas spent several months based in Benin City during his first tour (1909–1910), just twelve years after the infamous Punitive Expedition of 1897 in which large parts of the city were destroyed, artworks looted, and the Oba sent into exile. Thomas conducted research in other locations that had been directly targeted in military campaigns, such as Somorika, which British forces had attacked and forced into submission in 1904, and areas of Esanland, which resisted British domination until 1906. In his third tour (1912–1913), Thomas’s work focused on many Western Igbo towns that had been deeply involved in the anti-colonial Ekumeku insurgency, including at Ogwashi-Ukwu, where an uprising had been quashed as late as 1910.²³ Thomas’s investigation of “native customs and laws,” his making of physical type photographs, recording of “specimens of language,” and even his documentation of string games cannot therefore be disentangled from the use of Maxim gun and rocket fire that preceded his surveys and made them possible.²⁴ Indeed, there is bitter irony in the fact that the shrines, rituals and other aspects of traditional customs that so piqued anthropologists’ interests, were themselves targets of colonial military attack.²⁵ In this sense, Thomas embodied the paradigm of “salvage anthro-

22 Robert D. Jackson, “The Twenty Years War: Invasion and Resistance in South-eastern Nigeria, 1900–1919” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1975).

23 On the colonial conquest of Southern Nigeria, see Philip Aigbona Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom, 1897–1938* (London: Longman, 1979); Philip Atsu Afeadie, “The Semolika Expedition of 1904: A Participant Account,” *History in Africa* 31 (2004), p. 1–18; Joseph Inegbenebho Osagie, “Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Esan People of Benin Province of Nigeria,” *Canadian Social Science* 10 (2014), pp. 82–89; Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement: Western Igbo Resistance to the British Conquest of Nigeria, 1883–1914* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1991).

24 Hicks observes that ethnographic display “was surely as significant a technology in the history of Victorian colonialism as the Maxim machine gun.” Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), p. 11.

25 Z. S. Strother, “‘Breaking Juju,’ Breaking Trade: Museums and the Culture of Iconoclasm in Southern Nigeria,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67–68 (2016/17), pp. 21–41.

pology,” picking over the ruins of a way of life in the aftermath of its violent dissolution.

In the *[Re:]Entanglements* project and exhibition, it was important to acknowledge the associations between the epistemic violences of colonial anthropological research, collecting and knowledge production on the one hand and the physical violences of colonial conquest on the other. The trace of violence was not, however, easy to read in the anthropological archive, though many of our diasporic interlocutors saw it plainly in the faces of many of those Thomas photographed.²⁶ It was, however, expressed metaphorically in the damage evident in certain objects. As material manifestations of anthropological objectification and prejudicial “race science,” Thomas’s physical type photographs were (and are) certainly “damaging,” and a sense of this damage was conveyed powerfully when we encountered broken glass plate negatives of such images. While the negatives are fragile and were most likely damaged in transit or through being dropped, metaphorically the splintered sherds of glass expressed something of the fracturing violence of the colonial encounter.



Fig. 3: “Empty Frames, Fractured Images” installation in the *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition. Left: installation view of the case displaying a selection of decorative carved mirror frames collected by N. W. Thomas in Southern Nigeria in 1909–1911. (Photo: Paul Basu.) Center: colored scan of a broken glass plate negative of Chief Obaseki, photographed by N. W. Thomas in 1909. One of two enlarged images of broken glass plate negatives used as case backs. (Royal Anthropological Institute 400.16548.) Right: shattered Edwardian mirror glass bearing the photographic portrait of N. W. Thomas.

26 See, for instance, *[Re:]Entanglements*, “Faces|Voices: Confronting the Photographic Archive,” March 7, 2019, <https://re-entanglements.net/faces-voices/> (accessed June 21, 2024)

In the *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition, we deployed large scans of such fragmented images in an installation of glassless wooden mirror frames collected by Thomas during the surveys (fig. 3). At the bottom of the display case, as if it had fallen from the Nigerian mirror frames, we placed a shattered Edwardian mirror on which Thomas's own photographic portrait had been printed. This installation was juxtaposed with a display of a selection of Thomas's physical type portraits, which were arranged to frame a video installation, *Faces|Voices*, in which interviewees discuss what they perceive in the faces of the photographic subjects (fig. 4). A text panel adjacent to the mirror installation seeks to draw out the questions posed by the material metaphors:

Empty frames, fractured images

The colonial anthropologist's photographs were exposed on glass plate negatives. Fragile, like mirror glass, their fractured images cause us to reflect.

Objects and materials travel. European mirror glass was imported into West Africa and was widely traded. Installed in locally carved wooden frames, mirrors became status symbols. They were sometimes used in ceremonies; windows into the world of the spirits.

Ethnographic "specimens," such as these decorative mirror frames collected by Northcote Thomas in Southern Nigeria, were brought to Europe. Displayed in museums, they provided windows into the worlds of other cultures and other ways of life.

How distorting were these views?²⁷

27 *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition panel text, authored by Paul Basu.



Fig. 4: “Beyond the Colonial Gaze?” installation in the *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition. A selection of physical type portraits photographed by N. W. Thomas during his anthropological surveys frame the *Faces/Voices* video, in which interviewees describe what they “see” in these highly contested images. Note the red vinyl designs in the background derived from the string figures documented by N. W. Thomas.

This theme of damage and fracture was reflected in other materials displayed in the exhibition, including in a pile of clay pot sherds—the pots had been collected whole by Thomas during the surveys, but had been broken while being shipped to Britain. A particularly remarkable pot, bearing the figure of the Edo deity Olokun and which had experienced a similar fate, was included in this display. In this case, however, we worked with a conservator to reconstruct the pot from its fragments, and used it to pose questions about the possibility of repair in the wake of colonial violence. In the process of reconstruction, it was important to make the repair visible to acknowledge the impossibility of “undoing” the damage that had been done, of repairing the irreparable.²⁸ In the wake of colonialism, there can be no return to a pristine, pre-colonial world, but perhaps there are ways of taking care and attending to the consequences of these traumatic histories—ways of “staying with the trouble.”²⁹

28 Noémie Etienne, “Who Cares? Museum Conservation between Colonial Violence and Symbolic Repair,” *Museums and Social Issues* 15 (2021), pp. 61–71.

29 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

String Figures: Knots, Ties and Troubles

Matters of fact, matters of concern, and matters of care are knotted in string figures.³⁰

Alongside motifs of damage and repair, the primary metaphor through which we “thought” the *[Re:]Entanglements* project and exhibition was entanglement itself. And here, the “[Re:]” of our title signified both the preposition “re,” meaning “with reference to,” “concerning,” or “in the matter of,” and the prefix “re-,” meaning “again” or “back.” On the one hand, we wanted to signal that the project and exhibition were concerned with exploring the nature of the entanglements between archives and museum collections, knowledge-producing disciplines such as anthropology, and colonialism. On the other hand, we asserted a need to re-entangle ourselves—to concern ourselves again—in these matters: to reflect together on how our personal or family histories are entwined in these colonial histories in different ways. In an age of polarizing identity politics, in which complexity is often vilified, one argument of the project/exhibition was that we cannot take the relationships between archives, knowledge production and colonialism for granted, nor can we take for granted the singularity of our own positionality with regard to these histories.

Entanglement, then, has become a powerful metaphor through which to “think” complexity, uncertainty and indeterminacy. One way or another (or, more often than not, in many different ways), we are entangled in these histories; we are differently implicated in them and consequently have different perspectives and affective responses to them. Entanglement helps us to engage with the messiness of multiple conjunctions of multiple forces—histories, identities, ideologies, technologies, contingencies, etc.—such that one could take any single thing from the archive (a mirrorless mirror frame, for example) as a point of departure to reflect on the knots and ties of these temporal, spatial, material and political trajectories. As individuals, we are also knotted into these matters of fact, of concern and care.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

Mining the archive of Thomas's anthropological surveys, it was his photographs of string figures that spoke most eloquently to the metaphor of entanglement. While we did not consciously engage with Haraway's use of string figures as "a theoretical trope" in the project, reflecting back now, we find consonance with the poetics of her arguments, and particularly with the associative threads she ties between string games and storytelling. They are above all about processes and provisionality; of making connections, perceiving patterns momentarily, then allowing them to dissolve again. They are about tangling and then untangling, "weav[ing] paths and consequences but not determinisms."³¹ Our work with the archives and collections of Thomas's surveys enacts materially, it might be said, ideas that Haraway expresses in figures of speech (that is, in language). Indeed, this translation back and forth between the material and the ideational is precisely the work of metaphor, and, in this respect, exhibition becomes a powerful medium not only for thinking through things, but also for constituting things through thought.

As noted above, in 1911, Thomas photographed just fifteen examples of string figures: eleven in the town of Agukwu Nri and four in the town of Ebenebe, both in the vicinity of Awka, which had become the district-level seat of colonial governance for this Igbo-speaking area. These are among the earliest photographs of string figures taken on the African continent. Thomas did not discuss string games in his published reports, and no fieldnotes survive from his Awka District tour (1910–1911), so we do not know whether he documented the games in greater detail, for instance using the methodology proposed by Rivers and Haddon. What does survive in the archive is a set of glass plate negatives, held by the Royal Anthropological Institute (figs. 5 and 6), corresponding loose prints, held by the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and further prints of the same photographs mounted in albums, copies of which are held at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the UK's National Archives (fig. 1).

31 Ibid., p. 31.

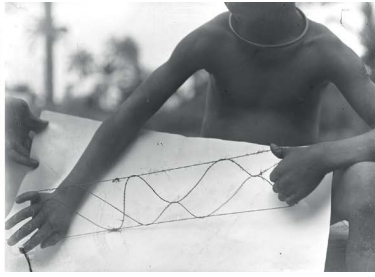


Fig. 5: Scan from glass plate negative of a boy demonstrating a string game, photographed by N. W. Thomas in the town of Ebenebe in 1911. This is one of four string figures for which Thomas recorded the Igbo name *Ibudu*, translated simply as “Trap.” Left: photograph of the original glass plate negative; right: an inverted scan of the same plate.

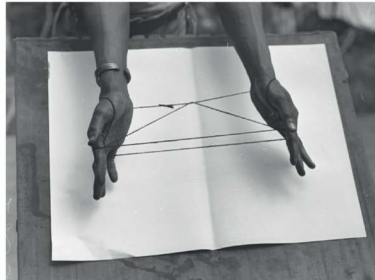
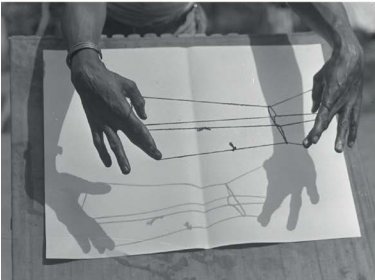
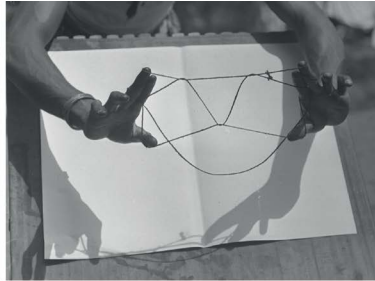
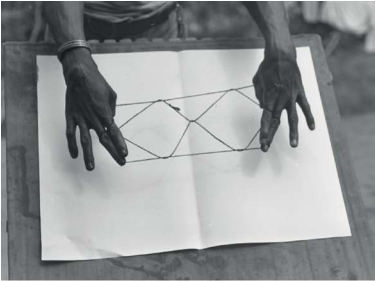


Fig. 6: Detail of four string figures photographed by N. W. Thomas in the town of Agukwu Nri in 1911. Clockwise from top left: *Ibeji okotoko* (“Big piece of yam”); *Okulu agadin waiyi* (“Big belly of old woman”); *Okba mwo ji ebu mwadu* (“Basket spirits use to carry person”); *Ozu nakwa* (“Corpse and cloth”).

Thomas recorded the Igbo word for string games generically as *okpukpa*, which simply means “to make or create something by hand.”³² Thomas also documented the names of the particular figures he photographed in his somewhat idiosyncratic phonetic transcription of the local Igbo dialects, alongside English translations, as follows:

³² N. W. Thomas, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-speaking Peoples of Nigeria, Part II: English-Ibo and Ibo-English Dictionary* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1913), p. 16. Thomas transcribes the term as *akpukba*.

- *Eta nanwani ori*; Trap to catch thief (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Okba mwoji ebu mwadu*; Basket spirits use to carry person (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Ibeji okotoko*; Big piece of yam (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Ozu nakwa*; Corpse and cloth (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Nwenwelie ora odo*; Child of monkey eats and tears its tail (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Okulu agadin waiyi*; Big belly of old woman (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Okefi mpi agi liga*; Bull with long horn (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Oyo anele*; Net for load (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Ubwadiye*; Fowl's anus (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Oga*; Mask for "juju" (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Bokulei*; Rope on back (photographed in Agukwu Nri)
- *Ibudu*; Trap (photographed in Ebenebe)
- *Ibudu*; Trap (photographed in Ebenebe)
- *Ibudu*; Trap (photographed in Ebenebe)
- *Ibudu*; Trap (photographed in Ebenebe)

Prior to our own work with them, the string figure expert Philip Noble had published an article on Thomas's photographs, providing step-by-step instructions for recreating the figures. He notes that most of the figures photographed by Thomas have been recorded elsewhere in Africa, though with different names.³³ Noble kindly created a series of videos for the *[Re:]Entanglements* project demonstrating each of the string games.³⁴

To presence these material metaphors in the *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition, we reproduced Thomas's photographs of string figures in a section near the exhibition entrance, alongside two text panels: one introducing the broader themes of the exhibition (including the themes of entanglement and re-entanglement), and another more specifically introducing string figures as both a subject of anthropological inquiry and a metaphor of entanglement.

33 Philip D. Noble, "Some Nigerian String Figures," *Bulletin of the International String Figure Association* 20 (2013), pp. 39–63.

34 Paul Basu, "NigerianStringGames," September 4, 2019, <https://re-entanglements.net/nigerian-string-games/> (accessed June 21, 2024).

String games

String games have been played across the world for millennia, including in Britain and West Africa. From tangled strings, patterns emerge. Each of us may, however, perceive different things in the shapes they form.

Entanglement provides a metaphor for this exhibition. Into these displays are knotted damaged images and images that damage, fragmented pots and dislocated voices. But you will also find creative re-appropriations, transformations and attempts at repair.

These collections are implicated in the violences of colonialism. Might they also help bring about a more hopeful future?³⁵

The question of perspective and positionality introduced in the panel was an important affordance of the string figure as material metaphor, reflected in the fact that the same patterns of loops and knots may be perceived to represent different things.

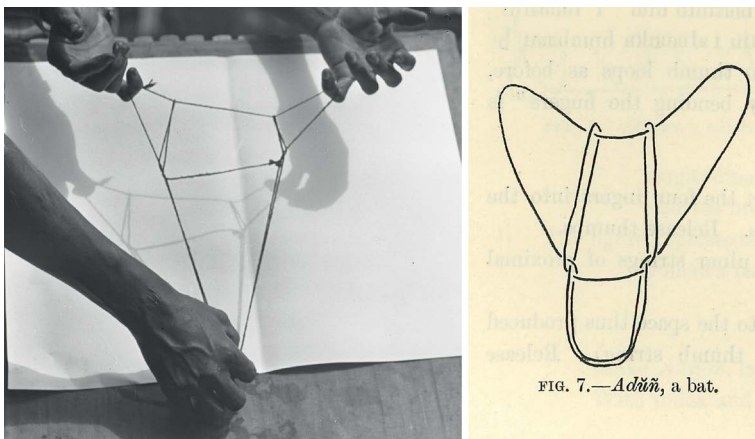


Fig. 7: The same figure, but perceived as representing different things. Left: detail of N. W. Thomas's photograph of *Okefi mpi agi Iiga* ("Bull with long horn") taken in Agukwu Nri in 1911. Right: the same figure documented by the colonial geologist John Parkinson in south-west Nigeria, recorded in Yoruba as *Adun* ("Bat"), published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 36 (1906).

35 [Re:]Entanglements exhibition panel text, authored by Paul Basu.

As Noble notes in his discussion of Thomas's photographs, the figure "Basket spirits use to carry person" elsewhere represents a palanquin used to transport chiefs; "Child of monkey eats and tears its tail" has also been recorded as "A Pair of scissors" and "Aeroplane"; "Bull with long horn" is elsewhere "Bat"; and, in Ghana, "Big belly of old woman" tells the story of "When this animal went to fetch water, the sun came down" (fig. 7).³⁶ As our text panel sought to communicate, within the complex configurations of colonial histories and their legacies in the present, we derive different understandings and perceive different realities depending on the contingencies of our own pluralistic and dynamic positionalities. This is again reflected in the responses of visitors when encountering the faces of individuals captured in Thomas's physical type portraits: where one person perceives abjection and victimhood, another sees resilience and strength. Echoing Haraway, the "truths" we perceive and tell have consequences, but we should be cautious of over-determining any as a singular "truth."

From Material Metaphor to Exhibition Design

The *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition was conceived as a space of reflection and debate, which would allow for the making and unmaking of connections, the perception then dissolution of meaningful patterns, knots and ties. Most importantly, we wanted to create an environment that activated the material metaphors that we mined from the archives of Thomas's anthropological surveys. A key part of this was to encourage visitors to reflect on how they, too, were entangled in these histories of colonialism and colonial modes of representation. The string figures provided a powerful motif here.

36 Noble, "Some Nigerian String Figures."

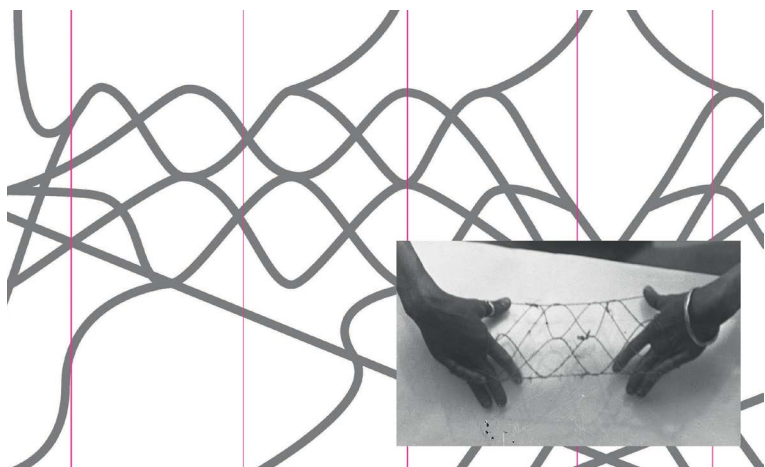


Fig. 8: A section of Alafuro Sikoki-Coleman's designs for the [Re:] *Entanglements* exhibition vinyl wall coverings. Inset is a detail from N. W. Thomas's photograph of a string figure called *Ibudu* ("Trap") taken in Ebenebe in 1911, one of the figures from which Sikoki-Coleman's designs were derived.

We worked with the Nigerian artist and designer Alafuro Sikoki-Coleman to enlarge and extend the patterns of the string figures in Thomas's photographs so that they covered the "white cube" space in which we had created the exhibition (fig. 8). These were created in red and grey vinyl and applied to the white walls, and extending over the tops of the display cases (see figs. 2 and 4). Our intention was to transform the passive space of the gallery into an active, immersive material metaphor itself.³⁷ Visitors entering the gallery had the impression of entering into a huge string game. Becoming entangled in the string figure of the exhibition provoked an affective response in visitors, shaping their experience of the displays and installations, and inviting them to engage actively in the conversation about the legacies of colonialism that we hoped to stage (fig. 9). As one visitor commented: "That is the re-entanglement for me [...] to see it in this particular way, that we are all entangled *together* in this history."³⁸

37 See Paul Basu, "The Labyrinthine Aesthetic in Contemporary Museum Design," in Macdonald and Basu, *Exhibition Experiments*, pp. 47–70.

38 Visitor interview: Nadia Maddy, June 28, 2021.



Fig. 9: Entangling visitors in the conversation. Installation view of the *[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times* exhibition, University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2021/2022.

In an interview for the *African Object Lessons* podcast series, Sikoki-Coleman reflected on her understanding, as a three-dimensional designer, of artefacts and objects as “language in solid form.”³⁹ She explains how objects need to be able to converse, both with us as humans who interact with them, but also with each other. Just as language is dynamic and changeable according to context and over time, so we must avoid fixing the meaning of things—including the objects, images, sounds and texts in the colonial anthropological archive.

The space of the exhibition should also be “unfixed,” and resist determining the “message” that it intends to convey. The objective, then, was to use the design of the exhibition to foster conversation and dialogue, and allow “enough breathing space between the works on display and the audience, so they could meet in the middle and create their own story, [...] build their own understanding, rather than dictating ‘this is what it is, only this.’”⁴⁰

39 “Alafuro Sikoki-Coleman on Exhibition Design,” *African Object Lessons* podcast, December 8, 2021, <https://redcircle.com/shows/056e7308-6f79-409c-ad04-ca8283c04def/ep/9582c135-9a70-413c-9dda-fd234b481bc4> (accessed June 21, 2024).

40 Ibid.

Encountering the photographs of string figures in the anthropological archive reminded Sikoki-Coleman of her own childhood in Bayelsa State, not far from where Thomas conducted his surveys at the beginning of the twentieth century. She recalls playing cat's cradle with her friends and sister. "But imagine," she explained in the podcast, "imagine this giant, giant string game [...] That's what ended up running around the walls of the exhibition, weaving times and cultures and people together. [...] Because we are all in this string game. We're suspended in it."⁴¹

41 Ibid.

The open access version of this publication was generously supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.



**UNIVERSITÄT
LUZERN**



DIAPHANES, Zurich 2025

Layout: 2edit, Zurich

Cover image: Ruth Altenbach and Dunia Lingner,
photographed by Piet Esch.

OA Edition

ISBN 978-3-0358-0772-1

DOI: 10.4472/9783035807721

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Printed Edition

ISBN 978-3-0358-0750-9

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