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Designs Incised on Pearl Shell from North-Western Australia and Tanimber. *By Carl Schuster, Ph.D.*

Among pearl-shell ornaments with "key or meander" patterns, said to be characteristic of the Karadjeri tribe around La Grange on the Kimberley coast of North-western Australia,¹ is a specimen illustrated by Mountford and Harvey,² here reproduced as Fig. 1. We venture to see a similarity between the scratched design of this pendant and the design incised on a spoon of nautilus shell from the island of Tanimber in eastern Indonesia, Fig. 2.³ The darkening of design areas by means of cross-hatching and other forms of *hachure* is characteristic of the Tanimber spoons, as it is of the particular type of Australian pearl-shell ornament here in question. The designs of the Tanimber spoons generally include pairs of human figures arranged in various attitudes. In the example here illustrated, two legless bodies, evidently conceived as facing in opposite directions, are joined by a sinuous common torso. The question may be asked whether the complicated "meander" incised on the Kimberley pendant, Fig. 1, might not be the debased version of a Tanimber design of the type of Fig. 2 ; i.e., whether it might not be derived from a pair of human torsos arranged to form a conventional pattern somewhat like those of the picture suites in our card games, in which the figures always face in the same direction, no matter which way the card is turned.

By way of support for the possibility of relationship between these two designs, we cite the following statement about native trade between Indonesia and Australia : "The Malays from

¹ Elkin, as quoted by F. D. McCarthy, " ' Trade ' in Aboriginal Australia, and ' Trade ' Relationships with Torres Strait, New Guinea and Malaya," *Oceania*, Vol. IX, 1939, p. 97.

² C. P. Mountford and Alison Harvey, "A Survey of Australian Aboriginal Pearl and Baler Shell Ornaments," *Records of the South Australian Museum*, Vol. VI, 1938, p. 122, fig. 4, D (from Bernice Bay).

³ After the original in Amsterdam, Indisch Instituut, ethnographical section, A. 2226 a.

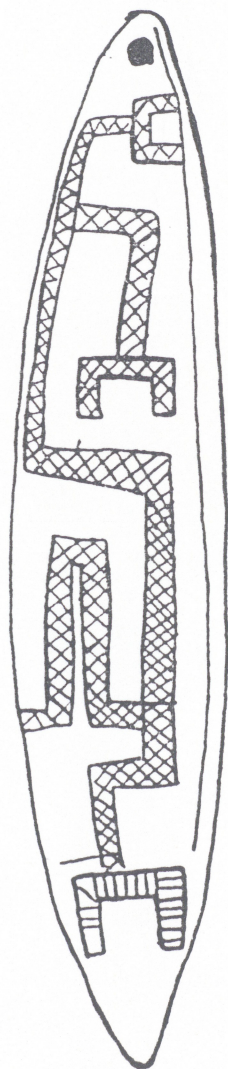


Fig. 1.

Makassar (Celebes), Koepang (Timor) and Timor-laut [i.e., Tanimber], from an early date, made yearly voyages down through the East Indian Islands and through the Arafura Sea to the northern coast of Australia . . . They made these long trips to Australia because they wanted to acquire the native pearl-shell, pearls, tortoise-shell, trepang and sandalwood, found all along the shores of north Australia."⁴ Though we do not propose that *all* "key or

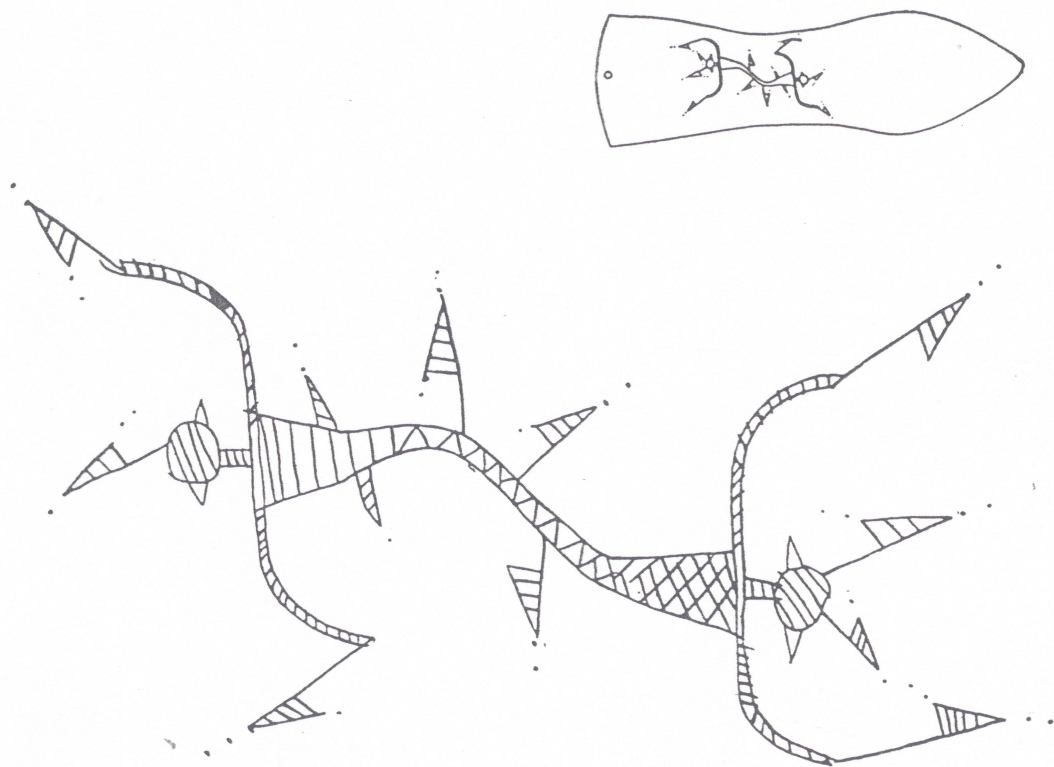


Fig. 2.

meander" patterns on the Kimberley pendants are necessarily derived from human figures inspired specifically by models from this one Indonesian island, it should be kept in mind that, apart from the striking similarity of material and technique in this particular instance, "meanders" derived from series of human figures facing in opposite directions and joined by their torsos are widely characteristic of Papuo-Melanesian art.⁵

⁴ L. Warner, *A Black Civilization*, 1937 (appendix), as cited by McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁵ See, e.g., K. Th. Preuss, "Künstlerische Darstellungen aus Kaiser-Wilhelmsland," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. XXIX, 1898, p. 80, figs. 1-10, etc. (The present writer plans to develop this theme in a separate publication.)