

# THE WEAVER FISH

Robert Edeson



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**My son**

God created Man, I say. For why would Man, who is rational, create the God who has power over him, demanding obeisance as I do?

**O Lord**

Man is more deceiving than rational, I say. Man created God not to have power over him, but to have power over others.

Leonardo di Boccardo  
*Conversazioni e Silenzio*

## FOREWORD

When it was suggested by Dr Darian that I provide some prefatory remarks for his latest work, I confess to having reservations. For a start, I knew very little of the culture and contemporary geopolitics of the Ferendes, and even less about its evidently unique ecology and natural history. Indeed, my abiding qualification regarding the South China Sea is that once I fell into it, fully frocked.

Another difficulty was a shameful, life-long reading indolence, especially around fiction. For weeks I plotted how to introduce this volume persuasively without actually opening it.

Then, last Sunday, in one of those freakish accidents that are surely sent to repair the incorrigible in our souls, I dropped the manuscript and it fell open on my study floor. I saw endnotes. There was an index. There were citations. There were names: Newton, Shannon, Markov, Machiavelli, Darwin—all real people. And real places: Cambridge, Perth, Madregalo. This wasn't fiction at all! I was enticed. I began to read.

Now, the perfectly understandable expectation was that my contribution should draw the reader in. (I must here give assurance that neither author nor publisher exerted undue pressure. I was tasked only to inform the reader, as seductively as I am able, that throughout the work all angles are in radians.) Even so, I am bound to be honest. I will say that here, partly, is a text of philosophical preoccupations, foremost perhaps being the issue of truth; especially truth constructed and relativized within what I can only suppose is simulated fiction.

There are also informative expositions, drawing on multiple sources and levelled at the non-specialist, on belief, evidence, dreams, conscience, the individual in a causal world, the social ratification of personal identity, and practical perpetration. The last comes with helpful advice on the Prussica gunsight, hydrogen cyanide, incapacitating bewilderment, and the universal law of gravitation.

My personal favourite is Dr Darian's exploration of modern linguistic themes, including generalized translation theory—I promise you no better explanation of Thortelmann equivalence exists in all of English than can be found in these pages. And if you are affected by what you learn of the mute man, or the industry of silence explained by Barbara Bokardo, then you will find the nexus of language and destiny at work in the story of the Syllabines heart-wrenching.

Though serious and scholarly, I can assure the reader there is no academic sterility here; on the contrary, the text is light and accessible. So quite apart from those with a professional interest in conjecture, language, and authenticity, and students of civilization more generally, here is a work that would suit reflective readers of all ages.

As if this were not enough, there is also much to engender, and satisfy, our curiosity on matters ranging from advanced balloon craft engineering to the metaphysics of glass to the haematology of the swint. And to all those who engage in commercial air travel, I urge that you commit to memory the Reckles principles of survival science; they might well save your life one day.

But the greatest audience for this book may prove to be those who would inform themselves of developments in South-East Asia, and the criminal organizations connecting that region with Australia. Were it not for the intelligence and retiring heroism of people like Edvard Tøssentern, Richard Worse and Emily Misgivingston, and the professionalism of law officers like Victor Spoiling, the ruthless activities of those secret societies would impact more obviously on our lives. This book is, beyond all else, a graphic documentary of the odiousness of one such enterprise, Feng Tong, and the fitting dispatch of its principals.

Finally, and very much to my liking, Dr Darian has provided a compelling history and travelogue that is factual and entertaining, ideal for those who would immerse themselves in the romance of the South China Sea without the ignominy of near-drowning.

Magdalena Letterby  
Perth

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## 1. THE WEAVER FISH

Within the opaquely threaded dialects of the Ferendes, and in all the languages of all the coasts that share their latitude, there must be ten thousand distinct words for weaver fish. More words than reported sightings. More words than actual fish by now, possibly. And more words than the number of fishermen who have use of them.

The latter is logically, if speculatively, explained by Thomas MacAkerman's observation that each person uniquely owns a private, talismanic name, as well as sharing the communal vocabulary, itself vast. Since MacAkerman's time, the accumulated effort of a distinguished rollcall of anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists has generated no more plausible a theory.

More surprisingly, modern oceanography and marine biology, for all their sophistication, seem to have advanced our knowledge of the fish itself not at all. Except, of course, to amplify its mystique and elusiveness. No specimen having been caught and dissected, there is yet no scientific nomenclature, no genus, no species. *Acarcerata textor* might serve, when the need arises.

MacAkerman was a physician and amateur naturalist, of catholic interests and impressive breadth of scholarship, who accompanied Captain Joseph on HMS *King of Kent* for two voyages, in 1816 and 1819. An enthusiast of the new sciences, he was apparently a brilliant popularist and quite famous for his public lectures. These, unfortunately, were never edited for publication, though their quality can be inferred from the comments of contemporary diarists. He did author several papers and monographs on varied subjects, but in respect of the weaver fish only two primary sources survive. One is a short entry, bearing



his initials, in the first (and only) edition of the *New Scottish Encyclopaedia*. The second is a letter in the *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh*, of April 1823. MacAkerman there describes how, shortly after sunrise on Greater Ferende, he was exploring the littoral for crab species when he ‘occasioned’ on a large sea-pool, sequestered from the receding tide by a sandbar, and

about a half-fathom in depth at its most. My attention being focused in pursuit of the crustaceans, their size and colour and actions, I did not at first see something altogether more interesting, which I took then to be some optical phenomenon of the sand and water. I walked the circumference of the pool, to see it vary in place and intensity, and with light in front and behind. It took many minutes to discern, and then only in half belief, that I was seeing fish swimming, many hundreds of them, and of the most transparent substance imaginable, except for small eyes, themselves faint, so that what I had witnessed was the movement of eyes, and a changing refraction of the pool sand of great subtleness. My interest in crabs for the moment set aside, I watched for perhaps a half hour, then something impelled me to throw dry bread into the centre, expecting I don’t know what, but I hoped for some intensification of visible movement. What did follow I could not have expected, for I could not wildly invent the sight, nor would I wish to, for it recurs to me in most distressing images and waking dreams these last seven years. The bread floated for some moments in several pieces, without noticeable disturbance, nor any interest of the fish. Then a solitary gull, to whose aerial squawks I had been only half attuned, plunged at the feast, and rather than plucking one bit in flight, settled on the water, intending, I fancy, to enjoy the multiplicity. Then followed an event I would wish on no man’s conscience, and I am sorely in need to expunge from mine. In an instant the water rose in symmetry around the gull, but it was not water, but a mass of fish stacked high, as well

as I could see from the disposition of their eyes and the faintness of their bodies, in intercrossing alignments of great discipline that was surely not accidental. The wretched bird attempted flight, but to nought avail, as its legs seemed bound in a viscous gel. Then the fish trap (I should call it) rose higher to the full measure of its hapless victim, which soon became lifeless, appearing I thought as encased in ice fully a half foot above the water surface. The orchestration of the trap was now more evident, fish bodies tightly woven crisscross, like warp and weft, but layered, as a solid tapestry might be made, and quite still. And before my eyes, the gull dissolved. I repeat, the beast dissolved in minutes to skeleton alone, but for a strange purple colouration (which I would name Tyrian) surrounding it. Then abruptly, as if on some regimental bugle call, the whole edifice unweaved, the pool returning to its former state but for the gull bone sinking unimpeded at its centre, not five yards from where I stood.

I confess then to great perturbation in my heart. Where previously I had thought lightly of entering the water for the better inspection, I was now repelled, I should say fearful, and stepped back from its edge. For if they could rise so deliberately above its surface, could they not breach its boundary also? After some minutes of composure, and my anxieties abated, I resolved to learn more, and taking from my wares a fine pole net I set about straining the shallows from a discreet distance. To my delight I soon scooped one, a half yard in length as they had all appeared, and held it up for transport to the sand. But to my astonishment and sore disappointment this triumph was quickly reversed. For the fish, which made no movement throughout, took on the purple hue that I had noted earlier, though more intensely, seeming to secrete or gurgitate a slime that I can only guess was some digestive acid of the greatest potency, for almost in a second the fabric of my net was burnt and through its deficiency so effected my captive escaped, falling to the

water where it was instantly invisible. Standing there, with my net made useless for its purpose, I admit to the strangest feeling of defeat and perplexity, which in all my years of collecting God's creatures has no equal before or since.

MacAkerman goes on to describe further unsuccessful attempts to ensnare a specimen, but his efforts were eventually frustrated by the returning tide. It is difficult now to judge how this account was received. It was a time of a growing culture of wonder at the natural world, with a proliferation of gentleman scholarship that was rarely challenged. The last vigorous debate was on infinitesimals, and the next would be evolution. The modern critical discourse of science was in its infancy. Thus there was no subsequent correspondence on the topic in the *Transactions* or any other journal. None of this, of course, should be taken to impugn the accuracy of MacAkerman's report. He was, from all the evidence, a man of unimpeachable integrity and intellectual rigour whose contribution to the sciences has few parallels in his era. Only many years later, and then only in the practice of medicine, was his judgement disordered by the cruel and tormenting decline of his final illness.

There is no doubt that MacAkerman's discovery had a profound influence on him. In a public lecture series of 1824 (abstracted by the canal engineer James Lypton in his *Journal* of that year), he explained his motivation for the second voyage in 1819 as 'to further my researches in the natural history of the weaver fish' (the exact wording may be Lypton's). As it turned out, he never did acquire the specimen for which the Old World museums would have bid dearly; indeed he reported no further observations with any confidence.

But that is not to say the voyage was a failure, and at least two major achievements can be ascribed to 1819. First, he completed the collection that would form the basis of his definitive work on tidal crab speciation (long before Darwin's ideas were published), and secondly, he conducted what we would now call field ethnography among indigenous fishing communities, centred on language and folklore pertaining to

the weaver fish. The latter is a fragmented opus surviving only in notebooks, journals, and many secondary sources, and greatly deserves the attention of modern scholarship. From these studies, we learn that the majority of names for the weaver fish have roots in native words for death, water (that is, a fish made of water), invisibility, the colour purple and, of course, a woven cloth or matting. These meanings were so concordant with MacAkerman's own observation that he was persuaded that similar sightings must not have been infrequent, though obtaining witness testimony proved more problematic. In any event, MacAkerman first employed the term 'weaver' in 1816, apparently quite independently of any native tradition, and never varied from its use. Paradoxically then, whilst no synonyms exist in English, he has left us with a monumental foreign lexicology far exceeding that of any other single referent.

In 1916, exactly one hundred years after MacAkerman's seminal observation, a fisherman named Josef Ta'Salmoud, from the village of Madregalo on Greater Ferende, saw weaver fish. Ta'Salmoud himself gave only a brief description of his experience, and was never persuaded to repeat or enlarge upon it. But there are many eyewitness accounts, from villagers on the shore, which are fully corroborative of what he described. Some of those present were still alive in 1996, and were interviewed by this author during a Language Diversity Initiative field trip. It should be said in this regard that more research is needed using newer validation tools applied to both linguistic and thematic elements. Authentication studies also require a good understanding of cultural specifics in oral tradition, which can be very localized and idiosyncratic. This work is continuing as part of a wider LDI programme.

On days following severe night storms the fishing grounds of the Ferendes could be deceptively treacherous. It was customary for the chieftain of fishermen to enter the water first and, having ascertained conditions in the bay, signal to those on shore that they should remain there or join him. One morning, Ta'Salmoud set forth on this task. As was normal, his progress was observed closely by those on the beach. When he was

about fifty yards from shore he stopped paddling and stood in his canoe, facing the villagers. To this point, nothing seemed unusual, and they next expected his signal. None came.

The bay was rough with a big sea swell and a bad current. I stood in my canoe to give the signal: do not come out, I am returning. I thought, be careful, Ta'Salmoud, stand safely, these are the times—rough days making the signal—when my ancestors have drowned. But when I got up, suddenly the bay was calm and my canoe became still. I could have stood on one foot. I thought, I have been wrong, the bay is smooth. Then I saw water in my canoe, with little holes in the hide, and purple colour near my feet. When I saw the purple I knew it was the kenijo before I saw the kenijo themselves. The water came up to my canoe side, but it was the kenijo weaving, but water from the sea was inside, on my feet. I was thinking, I must give the signal to save my fisherman brothers, but I don't know if I did. I was so full of fear. Then my canoe was full of water, but not sinking because I think the kenijo kept it there. For as far as I could see there was the weaving, like a thick mat on the top of the sea, and I thought, Ta'Salmoud, you must run for your life and even though I thought I would die I stepped from the canoe onto the weaving fish mat and it seemed very strong. My feet sank only a little and my good balance from standing in my little boat kept me from falling. I took another step, and another, then I started to run. I knew that if I stumbled I would be eaten but I kept running. Every place that my feet touched there was a purple mark, and my feet hurt but I hardly looked down. I was looking at my village and my people. They said later that I was crying out my word all this time but I don't remember that. To me it is like a terrible dream, until I see my feet.

From the village beach, these events must have appeared truly astonishing.

It was very strange. When Ta'Salmoud stood up the rough water became smooth. Not like wind stopping but as if it was made into glass, all in a second. I thought, what signal will he give? Then his canoe sank and he just stepped onto the water and ran to us. The whole village was quiet. Poor Ta'Salmoud, he was saying over and over his word, not shouting, but very softly but we could all hear it. We all knew it was the fish. I did not breathe until he was safe, and then I did not breathe when I saw his feet. I don't know when I breathed again.

Not even the sight of a man running on the surface of the sea prepared the villagers for what they next saw.

When Ta'Salmoud was close to the shore he stopped running, I think as he felt the sand under his feet. He was still saying the word, and we could see his face was very frightened. He came from the water and was bending over like an old man. We were too frightened to go to him, and all of us stayed quiet. I could not look away from his feet but I could not look at them also. Then Maria [Ta'Salmoud's wife] stepped forward and took his hands, but she was looking downwards too. I think Ta'Salmoud then stopped the word and started crying, and I thought his face is not fear but pain. But we still stayed back, and Maria held him closer. He seemed in much pain and then he looked down, at his feet. From his ankles down there was no flesh, just bones and sinew, all purple stained. Poor Ta'Salmoud cried out and fell to the sand, in Maria's arms. He was half man, half rinlin. Purple rinlin.

The last word translates (somewhat inadequately) as skeleton, which is surely exaggerated. Presumably, the digestive secretions of the weaver fish had destroyed the skin and much of the soft tissues of his feet. There is no doubt that the foot bones below the ankle joint were exposed, but we must suppose that sufficient blood supply and other attachments were preserved to maintain rudimentary function. Sensory innervation was clearly

compromised, for he was not in constant agony as we would otherwise expect. Only when his feet became dry did he suffer pain, and this was quickly assuaged by immersion in seawater. Almost certainly, the cleansing action of the latter practice minimized the bacterial contamination that in these circumstances would ordinarily lead to suppuration, fasciitis and fatal septicaemia.

It is said that as Ta'Salmoud collapsed on the beach, the calm in the bay vanished, replaced in a moment by the most frightening storm the villagers had seen. For Ta'Salmoud, then, the weaver fish was not an agent of disfigurement and pain, but of salvation, providing safe deliverance from the temper of the sea.

Not surprisingly, the news of a fisherman who apparently calmed the sea, walked upon water, and suffered uncomplaining an unspeakable injury attracted the attention of the Church. In 1921, papal envoys visited the Ferendes to investigate the claims and determine a recommendation of sainthood. They declared in the negative on the grounds that, though the events truly occurred, they were not miraculous but explained by natural causes, namely the weaver fish.

There is one known photograph of Ta'Salmoud, taken during that visit, and protected under *lex Vaticani* (it may be viewed but not reproduced). He is at the centre of a small group, standing on the beach with the village behind. The others are bowed, but Ta'Salmoud's head is high, looking not at the camera but into the distance beyond. Almost certainly, he is staring at the sea. The photographer was clearly not a scientist, for what we would like to have had recorded is an image of Ta'Salmoud's feet. But the manners of the time, or ineptitude of the nuncio, have forever denied us this evidence. While his companions' feet are all on view, Ta'Salmoud's are hidden by the tub in which he stands, presumably immersed in his anodyne seawater.

Ta'Salmoud died, from all accounts peacefully, in the following year, 1922. He had never fished again, nor ventured into the bay. All the stories attest to him being treated with the greatest reverence, and after his death his word, *kenijo*, became the main word, the most precious word, and the most protective one, for all his descendants. There is something poignant about a great fisherman who had walked on the sea, thereafter to be made

forever to stand in it, in pots and pans and ignominious tubs, or at the water's edge, half in half out. Half man, half *rinlin*.

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This is an edited version of an illustrated address entitled 'Thomas MacAkerman to Josef Ta'Salmoud: A Century of the Weaver Fish', given to the Lindenblüten Society in Nazarene College, Cambridge, by **Dr E O M Tøssentern**, Fellow. The Advocacies referred to can be perused in *Edictum MCMXXI Iesus Solus*—Only Jesus (Walks on Water).