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The Chumash Sling

by Paul Campbell, copyright 1996

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It has been questioned whether Californians possessed the sling before European contact. Stephen Powers, however, reported it among the remote Mountain Winton during his travels in the early 1870s and wrote that miners before that knew its sting from these Indians. It was reputed more deadly than an arrow and its missile said to have gone farther. The Western Mono mountaineers employed the sling for war. Among the Yokuts, boys hurled the sling as well.

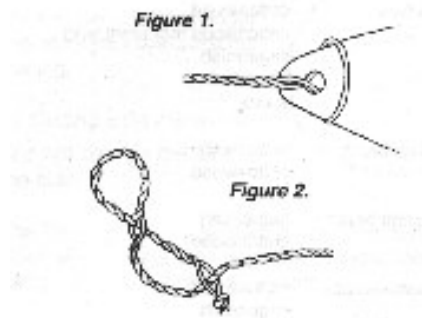
Gerardo Aldama and his son Gerardo, Kumeyaay of La Huerta in the Sierra Juarez of Northern Lower California recently told me they have made and used the sling which they always considered Indian, not Spanish. They twirled it against small game and birds. They felt it had more stopping power than an arrow. An arrow often only wounds or passes through a bird while a stone from a sling stuns or kills it. Of the Indians of Lower California in general the explorer Jose' Longinos Martinez wrote in 1792, they are very expert with the arrow, a curved club for rabbits and the sling.

The Pomo made a sling for hunting or war. E.M. Loeb described the technology: **A strip of deerhide about 4-1/2 inches long and between 2 and 2-1/2 inches wide formed the pocket. At either end, they attached sinew or nettle fiber strings, approximately 2-1/2 feet long each. A knot was tied at the far end of one string and the end of the other had a loop for the middle finger. A ball or stone was placed in the pocket and the pocket then folded over it. With the middle finger inserted in the loop, the thumb and forefinger of the same hand grasped the knot at the end of the other string and the hunter or warrior twirled the sling twice around his head and released the knot. Thus was the missile hurled.**

Sling throwers stood a little to the rear of the front battle line. Boys brought them stones in baskets. For geese, hunters hurled a round stone 1-1/2 to 2 inches in diameter. But for ducks or mud hens balls of clay 1-1/2 to 1-3/4 inches in diameter were used. The clay or adobe had been rolled in the hands while moist, then dried over a fire or in the sun. Clay balls were preferred to stones for ducks or mud hens because their lighter weight allowed them to skip along the water, sometimes taking more than one mud hen at a shot. Fernando Librado Kitsepawit, John Peabody Harrington's famous Chumash informant, gave important detail on the manufacture of the sling. The center strap or pocket to hold the stone he cut from elkskin: **he trimmed the corners and made it broad in the center and narrow at the ends-he doubled it transversely and trimmed the entire edge-then made a hole in each end for the string.** (He also spoke of a strap with a 3-inch slit in the center to grasp the stone though he had never seen one of these.)

He made two *tok* (Indian hemp) stings, about 33 inches long each. He opened or untwisted one closed end of a string enough to insert an end of the elkskin strap. This done, the other end of

the string he inserted and pulled through the hole in the end of the strap, firmly fixing it to the strap. It weaves or ties itself said Librado (see Fig. 1). He did the same with the other string on the other side.



He also made the finger loop "without tying." About 3 inches from the end or tip, he untwisted a small opening in the string. He put the end of the string through the opening. He then untwisted the string just below the tip and inserted the other end of the string all the way through this second opening (see Fig. 2). He pulled snug the finger loop that this procedure created.

As an alternative and to the same effect, instead of the other end of the string, the loop itself was inserted through the opening just below the tip after the tip had passed through the first opening around 3 inches beneath it.

A knot was tied in the end of the other string, even with the loop of the first string. Some string beyond the knot was left dangling. A completed sling measured about 3 feet long. You swung the sling three times around, then let go of the knot and the stone would fly said Librado Kitsepawit.

There were other Chumash ways and sometimes well worked bark of the "curly" willow was made into a sling pocket. Indian hemp string also could be woven into a pocket. There were undoubtedly many Indian ways of making the sling.



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