

## Kumeyaay Basketry

A Gift of the Past for the Present and Future



BEV ORTIZ

Many Americans cannot imagine ever having the patience to make a basket. But for Kumeyaay elder Celia Silva, age 65, and her daughter, Gloria Castañeda, age 47, that patience comes easily.

Celia and Gloria began learning to weave at young ages—Celia at ten, mostly under her grandmother's instruction, and also her mother's; Gloria at about age eight, guided by her maternal grandmother and great-grandmother. To begin the learning process, both women joined their elder relatives on gathering trips, and each received a basket start from her teacher, around which she practiced coiling. From time to time, their teachers checked their work. About two years later, after weaving around several starts provided for them, they graduated to making their own starts.

Celia's mother (Gloria's grandmother) taught weaving classes in the San José "village" school, near Tecate, in Baja California. As a youth, Gloria assisted her. Today, Celia and Gloria teach the very aesthetic, painstaking, and rewarding skill of Kumeyaay basketry to anyone who wishes to learn: men and women, Indians and non-Indians alike.

All three of Celia's daughters weave, and one of Celia's most promising students has proved to be her 13-year-old granddaughter, Aurelia Ojeda Melendrez. In keeping with her own methods of learning, Celia provides Aurelia with basketry starts. To date, Aurelia has completed two or three baskets with large coils, and is working on another.

I met Celia and Gloria at the 1994 California Indian Basketweavers Gathering, held at the Tuolumne MeWuk Rancheria last June. The ladies had never before traveled such a distance from their home at San Jose, nor had they ever seen the wooded foothills of the Sierra Nevada. They found the landscape lovely, and the company of the other weavers congenial.

With gentle manners and easy smiles, Celia and Gloria made many new friends at the gathering. They delighted in sharing their culture with those who attended. A highlight of the event occurred Saturday night, when Gloria sang fourteen Kumeyaay songs. These, Gloria told me, included themes such as the setting sun, transporting wild oats in a basket, the sadness of finding oneself far from home, and an owl and coyote.

Celia and Gloria do not speak English. They speak Kumeyaay to each other, and they also speak Spanish, although they are less comfortable with that language. Spanish was the language of my interview with Celia and Gloria, thanks to their friend J.B. Kingery, who graciously agreed to act as an interpreter. Rosie Moreno also acted as an interpreter during part of the interview.

Celia and Gloria are prolific weavers. They specialize in making miniature coiled trays with split juncus, an old-style Kumeyaay basketry form. Beginning a year or so ago, Celia and Gloria began to coil small turtles. Celia wove the first such juncus turtle at the request of former Cupa Cultural Center Director Tanty Diaz, who has a particular fondness for these reptiles. The women also began making tray and turtle earrings after Celia was commissioned to make a pair of tiny coiled earrings about three or four years ago.

They also make miniature willow granaries, some woven old-style, others fashioned like ducks, an innovation of Celia's. The Kumeyaay used full-sized granaries to store mesquite beans, pine nuts, acorns, and the like. Celia has also made willow horses, and another innovation is the creation of separate lids with tiny handles for some of the miniature granaries.

The first step in making any Kumeyaay basket is the gathering of materials. Celia and Gloria harvest the native black, red, golden, arroyo, and sandbar willows, as well as the introduced weeping willow, for their granaries during late spring, summer,

and fall. Since Kumeyaay granary foundations consist of leafy willow shoots, they discontinue the harvest in wintertime, when the leaves have fallen from the plant. They do not resume the harvest until after the pollen-rich blossoms have matured in early spring.

Celia and Gloria make their granaries with freshly gathered material. The sewing strands are whole shoots, gathered in late spring through fall. To strip the leaves from the branches, Celia and Gloria run their fingers along the stems from the tip toward the base of the cut shoots, leaving only a few leaves at the tip. They cut a point on the wider base or "butt" ends of the shoots, leading with these as they coil around the granary foundation. (They also cut the juncus sewing strands used in their trays and turtles at a diagonal.) The few leaves left on the other end serve as a kind of brake, preventing the shoot from being pulled right back out of the granary after the first stitch has been taken. Sandbar willow (*Salix hindsiana*), with its small stature and gray-green leaves, provides the favored granary material because it has long, flexible shoots and colorful bark. It takes about one week to complete a full-sized granary with a base approximately three and a half feet wide. This includes two days for gathering materials and five to six days' weaving time.

Celia and Gloria harvest juncus for the foundations of their trays and turtles throughout the year, but they wait until the full moon, or close to it, before picking juncus for sewing strands. For an unknown reason, juncus harvested during the full moon is tougher than that picked at any other time. This full moon gathering comprises the ladies' only basketry rule, although, in the old days, pottery-making required that a woman be neither menstruating nor pregnant.

Celia and Gloria harvest each juncus stalk by grasping it at the base, then pulling it away from the plant's perennial



Left: Gloria Castañeda twists juncus shavings as she prepares to make a starting knot. Middle and right: She has pierced the basket's foundation with a coat hanger awl. Leaving the awl in the center of the starting knot, she brings a trimmed strand of juncus into position for weaving (note shavings coming out of the starting knot). Photos by Bev Ortiz.

rootstock. Returning home with bundles of harvested juncus, they lay the stalks out to dry. Sometimes they lay the bundles on a roof, turning them once for even drying. Other times, they spread the juncus out flat. Before or after drying, they clip off the sharp tips, including any seed heads. They return these to the earth, thereby spreading the seeds. During the drying stage, the juncus turns from green to a yellowish-tan hue. The ladies clip off the lower portion, which has an orange-brown hue, a favored color for basket designs. They also create a black design element by soaking the juncus in a slurry of oak bark, acorn, or earth through which they have repeatedly poured water to leach acorn flour. The slurry sits in a coffee can or other metal container for three weeks to a month. If the container isn't metal, the ladies add a source of iron, such as bolts. They also make slurries of chimney soot, woodstove carbon, or black dirt with iron, in metal

containers or with a source of iron.

After drying the juncus stalks, Celia and Gloria split them into long pieces for sewing strands. The smaller stalks, about 1-1/2 feet tall, get split in half. The larger stalks, from plants growing upwards of six feet tall, get split into as many as six or eight separate strands, depending on their initial diameter. Usually, Celia and Gloria split the juncus by pulling an awl through the stalk, although they sometimes split it by placing one half of one end in their mouths, and pulling down the length of the stalk with their hands. When an awl is unavailable, they use sewing needles or safety pins. After splitting it, Celia and Gloria tie the juncus into coils with strips of rag. Finally, they bundle the coils together with a rag strip, which they hang for easy storage.

For a fine, even basket, each juncus sewing strand must be trimmed to a uniform thickness and width. First, Celia and Gloria soak the split juncus strands until they're flexible. Then they hold each strand against a leg or tabletop, and scrape off the inner core with an Exacto blade or pocket knife. This removes the spongy, inner pith. For final sizing, they trim the edges of each strand to an even width using the same tools.

Recently, Celia occasionally uses a can lid with holes punched in it for the final sizing, although she is more comfortable using a knife. Cahuilla weaver Donna Largo presented Celia with the first lid, and although the holes in it are larger than the sewing strands Celia usually uses, it reminded her of her grandmother's methods, so she modified its use: she would push and pull one side of a sewing strand against one side of the hole, so that the edge of the hole functioned like a knife. This fall, she had J.B. punch a lid with three or four small holes, so she can use the tool as it was intended, pulling the

entire strand through the hole and thus trimming both sides simultaneously.

The shavings which Celia and Gloria remove during the sizing process become the start of the basket's foundation. They twist, then knot these after a thorough soaking, then coil clockwise by guiding the trimmed sewing strands through the center of the knot until they have gone once around the knot. The ladies make several of these basketry starts at a time, setting them aside for later use in their own baskets or the baskets of their students. All subsequent rows of their baskets are coiled around a foundation of split juncus. After gathering juncus for the foundation, Celia and Gloria dry it. As with the sewing strands, they cut off the sharp tips and the colorful lower ends. Although the latter do not have the strength of the stalks gathered in the full moon, the ladies save them for design elements in case they run low on the other. Celia and Gloria then split the foundation stalks without removing the pith. They store the split material in bundles approximately 1-1/2 inches wide by 1-1/2 feet long. Pieces of this material are added as needed into the foundation without resoaking. Depending on the size of the coils, Celia and Gloria use anywhere from five to twenty pieces at a time in the foundation.

By piercing the basket's foundation with an awl, Celia and Gloria create an opening through which they can pull their sewing strands. Bone was the earliest Kumeyaay awl-making material, but Celia and Gloria have always used metal awls. Materials include anything that can be filed to a point, such as sardine can keys and coat hanger wire bent to form a tip with squarish handle, the latter type of awl being an invention of Celia's mother or grandmother. Celia and Gloria like to present their beginning basketry students with one of these quick and easy-to-make



Lest any readers be confused, Alex Ramirez (see "Skills & Technology" in the last issue of News) was taught to eat a newly growing leaflet of poison oak, not a full-sized one. Pictured here are three of the size leaflets he eats.

coat hanger awls. They also use wooden-handled Tandy leather awls, first grinding the thick metal tips down to a finer point with a file, or on an electric grinding wheel with the help of a friend. At a San Diego powwow, Celia was presented with an antler awl with mounted needle, which she used until the needle broke. J.B. repaired this awl with a nail ground down to a fine point. For their granaries, the ladies use Phillips screwdrivers as awls. At powwows and classes, if they don't have a screwdriver, they whittle pieces of hardwood and branches to the proper shape. They also use heavy spring, flattened and bent in the form of a round handle with tip protruding to the side. Since the holes made by the awl close rapidly once the awl has been removed from the basket, holding the sewing strand in one's mouth provides a convenient way to position it for quick handling.

Sewing strand splices consist of ends

thrown to one side, then overstitched. Celia and Gloria generally make a splice whenever they change the color of their sewing strands. However, when her design requires changing the color of the sewing strands on every other stitch, Gloria carries the sewing strands across the back of the basket instead of splicing them.

To create their somewhat upturned trays, the ladies hold the concave side of their basket toward them, doubling their stitches as needed to increase the size of the basket. Although the side the ladies face, known as the workface, remains free of split stitches, they occasionally occur on the other side. To complete a tray or turtle, the ladies taper the end of the final coil. The final stitch may be doubled over the leading edge of the taper, as in some of Beatrice Carrillo's baskets, or clipped flush a few stitches beyond the leading edge of the taper, as in some of Celia's.

## Reweaving Luiseño Traditions

SUSAN HAMILTON MITCHELL

On a beautiful, crisp September afternoon near the top of Palomar Mountain in San Diego County, members of the La Jolla and Pauma bands of Luiseño Indians arrived at a tribal member's house. They came to share in the legacy of their ancestors, funded by a grant from Native California Network. Their connections with the past would be formed by their hands, in the old, traditional ways of pottery and basketmaking. Traveling from remote villages in Baja California were the elders ready to share the knowledge through their hands, eyes, and smiles. Separated by the Mexican border, these experienced teachers continued the traditional ways similar to those of the Luiseño ancestors. Manuela Aguiar (Pai-Pai), the potter, and Celia Silva (Kumeyaay), the basketmaker, didn't speak English and we didn't speak Spanish or Kumeyaay, their native languages. So with the help of J.B. Kingery, who coordinated the transportation and the interpretation, language was never a barrier to the joy and laughter we shared during our many days together.

We delighted in being outdoors digging the clay, grinding it with old manos and metates, and building our pots with paddles and anvils. "Work the clay gently. Manuela says you're tapping the clay too hard with

your paddles... a little softer." *Slow down and take time. It was done like that then.*

A special excitement filled the air when it was time to fire the sun-dried pots. We dug the pit, gathered the dried yucca plants for fuel, put the pots in, lit the fire, and waited. "Is that the sound of the wood popping?" No, it was the sound of the pots exploding. Sadly, most of our pots came out broken. Manuela thinks it's because the clay probably needed more sand in it. We'll know better next time. But the ones that made it through, intact, proudly bore the rich, black burn marks from the fire. They were beautiful to everyone's eyes.

Picking the juncus shoots on the nearby Cahuilla Indian Reservation was a magnificent experience all by itself. We had a spectacular view of the land, trees, and gentle hills. No one else was even close by. Connected in time, we picked the grasses with the warm breezes blowing across our faces. It was like being on a treasure hunt looking for the prized grasses, the ones with lots of brown coloring at the bottom. It is from this brown hue that the designs in our baskets would evolve. The ever-patient Celia helped us start our baskets, always with a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eyes. Some seemed to have inherited the basketmaking skills, learning quickly and intuitively, while others

Asked which part of the basket-making process they like best, Celia Silva and Gloria Castañeda respond by referring to heritage and tradition. For them, all aspects of basketry are enjoyable, because all provide a means to remember and honor the people of the past. And all provide the opportunity and responsibility to carry that past into the future.

Today, Celia and Gloria bring their love of heritage and the joy of baskets to a new generation. For that, we can all be grateful.

*Special thanks to J.B. Kingery for reviewing drafts of this article with Celia and Gloria.*

*Bev Ortiz, a freelance writer and ethnographic consultant, is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.*

This Skills & Technology column has been possible in part because of the loving support and encouragement of my father, Joseph Antonio Ortiz. He died November 27, 1994.



*Photo of Celia Silva by Sharon Cox.*

needed more guidance.

These days were joyous ones filled with conversations, memories of grandparents' pots and baskets, and gentle work. I think we all felt a tremendous appreciation of what it took back then to create these works of art. Some members brought their collections of ollas, pipes, and baskets, even the rare rattlesnake ones. We held them with reverence. And as the glorious sunset ended the final day of our time together, we weren't finished... for there is still more clay to dig and more baskets to make. Ah ho.

*Susan Hamilton Mitchell, an elementary school teacher and a National Endowment for the Humanities Teacher Scholar for 1994-95, is working in conjunction with tribal members to write a Luiseño curriculum to be used throughout San Diego County.*

# Traditions weave a dying Indian lore to Earth Day

By ANGELA LAU  
Staff Writer

ENCINITAS — Straw by straw, Celia Silva and Gloria Castaneda wove their heritage into baskets, bowls and earrings.

Mother and daughter said little as they sat side by side yesterday, threading slivers of deer grass into circular patterns in the Kumeyaay Indian tradition.

It was a celebration of Earth Day at Quail Botanical Gardens in Encinitas, but it also was the commemoration of a dying craft, already lost to most of the latest generation of American Indians.

"This is our livelihood," Castaneda said in

Spanish through a translator. The 47-year-old Kumeyaay comes from San Jose de la Zorra, Mexico, 40 miles south of the border.

"Men in our tribe don't earn very much. Our baskets support our people," she said.

There is no secret to weaving good baskets, Castaneda said of the work, which often lasts into the night — "just lots of patience."

"But it's fun to do. We're giving part of ourselves to our work," she said as Silva, her 65-year-old mother, nodded in agreement.

Considered elders for their artistry, Cas-

taneda and Silva give lectures inside and outside Indian communities, teaching Indians and non-Indians their handiwork.

Interest is picking up, said Arlene Kingery, education coordinator for the Barona reservation. She recalled a 14-year-old girl from the Barona Band of Mission Indians who created a bidding war at home when she showed off a basket she made in class.

"Everyone in her family wanted it. They loved it. Some reservations are even planting deer grass," Kingery said.

"Native Americans have always wanted to learn about their culture, but there were never enough resources to teach them.

Now we're trying to schedule more classes."

Lecturing nearby, Jane Dumas, a representative of the San Diego American Indian Health Center, talked about the healing and nutritional values of herbs.

Warm plantain leaves, for instance, can relieve the pain of swollen glands, she said. And onions boiled in hot water can suck out puss in festering wounds. Young cactus leaves are good for healing gum problems.

"A lot of stuff we used to survive on, we don't use any more, just like our dying language," she said. "We're all trying to do our share to pass on our knowledge."