

Coca Pouches from Colombia

Entre los Arhuacos de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, las bolsas para coca son hechas de simples guinaldas. La manija de la bolsa es trenzada. Cada clan tiene sus distintos colores y diseños. Las bolsas de los Paeces, en el Sur de Colombia, son confeccionadas a base de la técnica de eslabón simple. Su decoración consiste en pequeños rectángulos coloridos. La manija de la bolsa es tejida en el telar. Los Guambianos (Sur de Colombia) manufacturan sus bolsas con la misma técnica de eslabón, pero el diseño consiste en triángulos de los colores blanco, azul, y rojo.

1. COCA

Coca is a shrub which requires a warm and moist climate similar to that in which tea is grown, and flourishes best at an altitude between 1000 and 1500 m above sea level. The ovoid-shaped leaves are harvested three or four times a year. They contain several alkaloids, the most important of which is cocaine. Like coffee, tea, and tobacco, coca has a stimulating effect and helps to suppress feelings of hunger, thirst, and fatigue.

There is much archeological evidence that the cultivation and cult of coca have a long tradition in the South American Andes. Before the Spanish arrival in South America, the coca cult had extended from Chile to Nicaragua. During rituals coca was chewed by the upper-classes and the priests. Under Spanish rule this privilege was gradually abandoned, and everybody felt free to use coca. The Spaniards paid their Indian workers partly with coca leaves, which the Indians valued higher than money.

During the following centuries, numerous campaigns against coca were launched either by church or by government officials who were convinced that it caused the Indians to be lethargic and apathetic. Colombian and Ecuadorian governments have been quite successful in suppressing this "vice of coca".

2. THE COCA CULT IN COLOMBIA

Today, only a few tribes, which live in the high mountains or in the Amazon jungles of Colombia, still chew coca (fig. 1). The Amazon tribes adopted coca only after the Spanish conquest. They dry and pulverize the leaves, and then mix them with the ashes of cecropia leaves. These ashes help to extract the alkaloids from the coca. The mixture is chewed and then swallowed.

The mountain people, in contrast, use coca in a traditional, quite ritual manner. They believe that this "divine" plant was given to them by their gods to make them more thoughtful and vigorous. To enhance the release of alkaloids from the leaves, they use quicklime prepared from limestone or seashells. This alkaline substance is added to the soft parts of the leaves. Both are chewed or simply kept in one of the cheeks. Only the juices are swallowed, the leaves are spit out.

Typical requisites of the coca cult are the ceramic bowl, in which the leaves are dried or toasted, the flask-like gourd (span. poporo), in which the quicklime is kept, the lime-spatula, and the pouch, in which the leaves and gourd are carried. Some of these utensils may still be found among people who cling to the old habit: the Arhuacos, Tunebos, Pijaos, Paeces, and Guambianos (1).

3. THE ARHUACOS

The three mountain tribes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta - Ica, Kogi, and Sanká - are collectively referred to as Arhuacos. They speak different dialects of the same linguistic family, Chibcha. Their habits and customs are very similar and derive from the pre-Columbian Tairona culture, archeological evidence of which is found in the vicinity of Santa Marta.

Arhuaco men weave their own clothes from self-colored cotton or wool yarn and adorn them with narrow selvage stripes. Their costume is complete with a tunic-like gown, wide pants covering the knees, and a cap protecting the open shoulder long hair. The cap is worked of hemp or cotton with simple looping stitches (?) over a spirally wound core of strands. The Ica cap (tutusomë) is conical in shape with a truncated top. The cap of the Kogi (sqou-ba) is topped with a low peak and is worn by shamans only. The women wear a toga-like garment with a loose sleeveless blouse sewn of purchased white cotton cloth.

Only the men are allowed to chew coca (hayo). The adolescent receives his poporo and the lime spatula from the shaman during the initiation rites. His coca pouch is given to him by his bride or mother as a gift of esteem. The Icas call it tutu, the Kogis gama, the Sankás zuzo. The women stitch these pouches whenever they have their hands free, even while walking. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1949-50: 259) learned that each coca pouch symbolizes the placenta of the Arhuacos' mother goddess. As another curiosity, he reports that the stitching of a pouch in the sole presence of a man may be understood as an invitation to sexual intercourse (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1949-50: 259).

The pouches are made from wool or cotton by simple looping. With a big sewing needle, one tiny buttonhole stitch is set against the other. The pouch is started from a flat disc of growing spirals called chipire. The number of meshes per row increases outward by stitching through the loops and, in addition, through the thread-crossings of the past row (fig. 13). At random intervals, increase rows are worked, until the spirals add up to a bowl, which forms the base of the pouch (fig. 3). Then the walls are built up. The rim of the pouch is decorated with big loops of double size (fig. 12).

The length of the carrying strap is calculated from the future owner's left shoulder down to the finger tips of the extended right arm. A continuous warp is wound, the nooses of which remain uncut. One end of the warp is held by the manufacturer's big toe (fig. 11, at point x). First, the sling that runs at the extreme left and right is crossed towards the center in simple braiding. It moves like a weft over and under one or two to as many as four warp nooses. In the center the two threads of the sling cross each other and turn into warps for the following wefts. Each additional row pushes them further outward until they reach the selvages and are again worked in as wefts. After the nooses have been completely interwoven, the loops on both ends of the shoulder strap are fastened to the rim of the pouch with large figure-of-eight stitches, as shown in fig. 11, at point y. Being more loosely woven in the center than at the selvages, the strap has a great flexibility.

According to Reichel-Dolmatoff (1949-50: 61), there exists among the Arhuacos a system of well-defined classes which originated from certain totemic clans of priests, warriors, and craftsmen. Each clan has colors and designs of its own. The Ica women reproduce these designs on the coca pouches. Animal designs can be recognized on photographs of Ica pouches published by Bolinder (1925: pl. 28). When he visited the Icas, only a few old women would still know how to stitch these complicated designs. Now, multicolored geometric patterns, such as spirals, arrows, meanders, and stripes predominate (figs. 2, 3).

Kogi pouches, in comparison, always exhibit brown transversal stripes on a light natural background (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1949-50: pl. 16). Equally simple are the pouches of the Motilones (Bolinder 1925: pl. 79), a tribe related to the Arhuacos, but living in the Sierra de Perijá (Serranía de los Motilones) (3).

Formally, vegetable dyes were used. Dussan de Reichel (1960: 142-143) was told that batatilla (convolvulus sp.) would dye yellow, a liana called chin-gisa as well as the leaves of a tree called morado red, the leaves of another tree named morito light yellow. Brazil wood produced a dark red, and for black, iron oxide was boiled in the dye from that tree. These natural dyes are now being replaced by chemical ones which are cheap and less laborious to handle.

4. THE PAECES

More "civilized" than the picturesque Arhuaco Indians are the Paeces in Southern Colombia. They wear their hair short, and their clothes appear less traditional. Dress making is the woman's task. Belts and the men's naturally shaded ponchos are handwoven. The men's knee-length trousers and the women's colorful appliquéed blouses are sewn from purchased fabrics (fig. 6).

Life is hard for the Paeces, and many poor are forced to chew coca to appease their hunger. Children of both sexes start between eight and ten years to chew coca and prove themselves thereby able to work on the family's farmland. Coca is chewed together with lime powder (mambe), for sale at the public markets. It is carried in a small gourd called kuetand-tuka. Instead of a lime spatula, the fingers serve to take the lime out.

Here too, coca pouches (kuetand-yaha) are gifts of esteem, manufactured by women from cotton or wool yarn. On a natural white background, red, blue, and yellow squares form a colorful checkerboard pattern (fig. 7). With sewing needles the pouches are stitched in a simple linking technique which resembles the construction of a wire mesh. The "overcasting" or "whipping" stitches produce an elongated mesh whose openings are barely perceptible unless the fabric is spread. The consistent crossings convey the appearance of continuous diagonals across the pouch, although no thread moves more than one link to the right or left of its original position (fig. 16).

The pouch is built up from the bottom in several sections. Each section starts out as a flat rectangular piece of predetermined length, which is continuously extended laterally until it joins, around the pouch, its edge of origin. In this way the bottom is made by producing at first a narrow collar and then pulling together its lower edge with a string to close the bottom hole. Whence the ubiquitous longitudinal wrinkling of the bottom part (fig. 5). When the first section of about one centimeter in length is complete, a second section with twice as many meshes (counted in transversal direction) is added. A third multiplication of meshes takes place after two more centimeters. At a diameter of approximately six centimeters the base of the pouch is ready. The walls are built in sections too, including the broad pattern stripe of colored squares, framed above and below by a round of triangles. About one centimeter below the rim of the pouch, a pattern of small holes (resembling the "leno" technique in weavings) is worked in. The rim

itself is fringed by a border stitch in herringbone pattern (fig. 15). The finished pouch, smaller than the Arhuaco pouches, measures no more than 20 cm in length (4).

The carrying straps are woven on a special, narrow loom (5). Its frame is a large forking bough from a tree. This loom is leaned upright against the wall of the hut. The weaving pattern is designed with the warp threads, while the wefts stay invisible. The woven strap is taken off the loom without cutting the warp ends. Rather the loops at both ends of the strap are used to attach it to the rim of the pouch (fig. 14).

5. THE GUAMBIANOS

Living to the west of the Paeces, the Guambianos (also called Mogueux) appear to be better integrated into Colombian society. An all-weather road from Pueblito, their main village, to Silvia and Piendamó facilitates the trade of their agricultural products in the marketplaces of the Cauca valley. The tribesmen wear distinctive costumes in the preferred colors of dark blue and carmine to geranium red. The women's shawls and the men's knee-length skirts are made from commercial blue cloth and trimmed with a red border. In contrast, the cloth for the women's skirts and the men's ponchos is still handwoven on vertical frame looms. It is grey, black or blue, adorned with narrow red and white selvage stripes.

With improving economic conditions, coca has lost its importance for the Guambianos. Pouches once used for coca, nowadays are employed as purses. The pouches (zore-urash) are stitched by the women in the same linking technique which the Paeces use. Triangles form the sole pattern. Each colored triangle has to be built up separately. All pouches exhibit the colors white, aquamarine blue, and carmine red, characteristic for the tribesmen's costumes. Though under these conditions the creativity of the pouch maker is limited, no two pouches are alike (figs. 8, 9). The materials used are wool and cotton, sometimes combined within one pouch. The weaving and attachment of the shoulder strap is comparable to that of the Paez pouch (6).

In contrast to the Paez pouch some simplifications are obvious:

1. The initial collar which forms the bottom has already the diameter of the finished pouch. No increases of mesh number are made from section to section. The large bottom hole is strongly drawn together with a string causing deep folds towards the bottom (fig. 10).

2. Below the rim, there is no hole pattern.

NOTES

- (1) Rochereau (1961:90-91) comments on the use of coca leaves and coca pouches amongst the Tunebos. His article includes a drawing of the knot that is employed in making the pouches (Rochereau 1961: fig.11).
- (2) The terms "simple looping", "simple linking", and "simple braiding" are taken from Irene Emery (1966: 31, 32, 62).
- (3) Because of curiosity it should be noted that an imitation of the Arhuaco type pouch is being manufactured in great quantities by the mestizo population which lives at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The bags (span. mochilas) are fabricated from hemp, customarily striped with the national colors yellow, purple, and red, with green sometimes being added. One of those mochilas can be finished within one day. Dussan de Reichel (1960: 139) mentioned their popularity along the Caribbean coast of Colombia. In the following ten years their production has increased so much that students, workers, peasants, and tourists all over Colombia now carry their belongings in them. Recently these pouches have appeared even in U.S. and European gift shops. They are remarkably lower in quality than those described and photographed by Dussan de Reichel (1960: pl.8). At her time, tasteful patterns were still common, and instead of a single crochet border, the pouch's rim had the same fringe loops as the Arhuacos'.
- (4) For every-day uses other than the keeping of coca leaves and gourd, a larger size bag (yaha gwala) is made from hemp by the same technique. The ground of unstained hemp is decorated with a few random vertical color stripes. Instead of dyeing the hemp thread, a string of colored wool (preferably red and blue) is plied with it.
- (5) It is no accident that woven straps are used. Paeces as well as Guambianos are known for their industry of belt weaving, an art that is common to various tribes in Southwestern Colombia and Ecuador (within the boundaries of the former Inca empire). In Southern Colombia woven belts and straps are called chumbes, a name derived from the appropriate Quechua term chumpi.
- (6) As with the Paeces, larger pouches of hemp (quambías) are in use for food and purchases.

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FIGURES

Fig. 1: Distribution of coca among indigenous tribes in Colombia (after Mendoza Uscateguí 1954).

Fig. 2: Ica pouch. Height 33 cm, width 29 cm, shoulder strap 87 cm. Wool. Colors: white, red, and black. Bought in San Sebastián de Rábago in 1971.

Fig. 3: Ica pouch. Height 31 cm, width 28 cm, shoulder strap 72 cm. Wool. Colors: white, orange, and blue. Bought in Valledupar in 1963.

Fig. 4: Bottom view of Ica pouch (same as fig. 2).

Fig. 5: Bottom view of Paez pouch (same as fig. 7).

Fig. 6: Paez couple with coca pouches. San Andrés, Cauca.

Fig. 7: Paez pouch. Height 18 cm, width 15 cm, shoulder strap 87 cm. Wool. Colors: white, orange, carmine red, purple, and blue. Bought in Caldas in 1971.

Fig. 8: Guambiano pouch. Height 17 cm, width 15 cm, strap 57 cm. Wool and cotton. Colors: white, carmine red, and blue. Bought in Pueblito in 1971.

Fig. 9: Guambiano pouch. Height 14 cm, width 15 cm, strap 61 cm. Wool and cotton. Colors: white, carmine red, and blue. Bought in Pueblito in 1971.

Fig. 10: Bottom view of Guambiano pouch (same as fig. 8).

Fig. 11: Synoptic scheme of fabrication of shoulder strap by simple braiding.

Fig. 12: Decorative fringing of the Arhuaco pouch.

Fig. 13: Scheme of fabrication of pouch by simple looping.

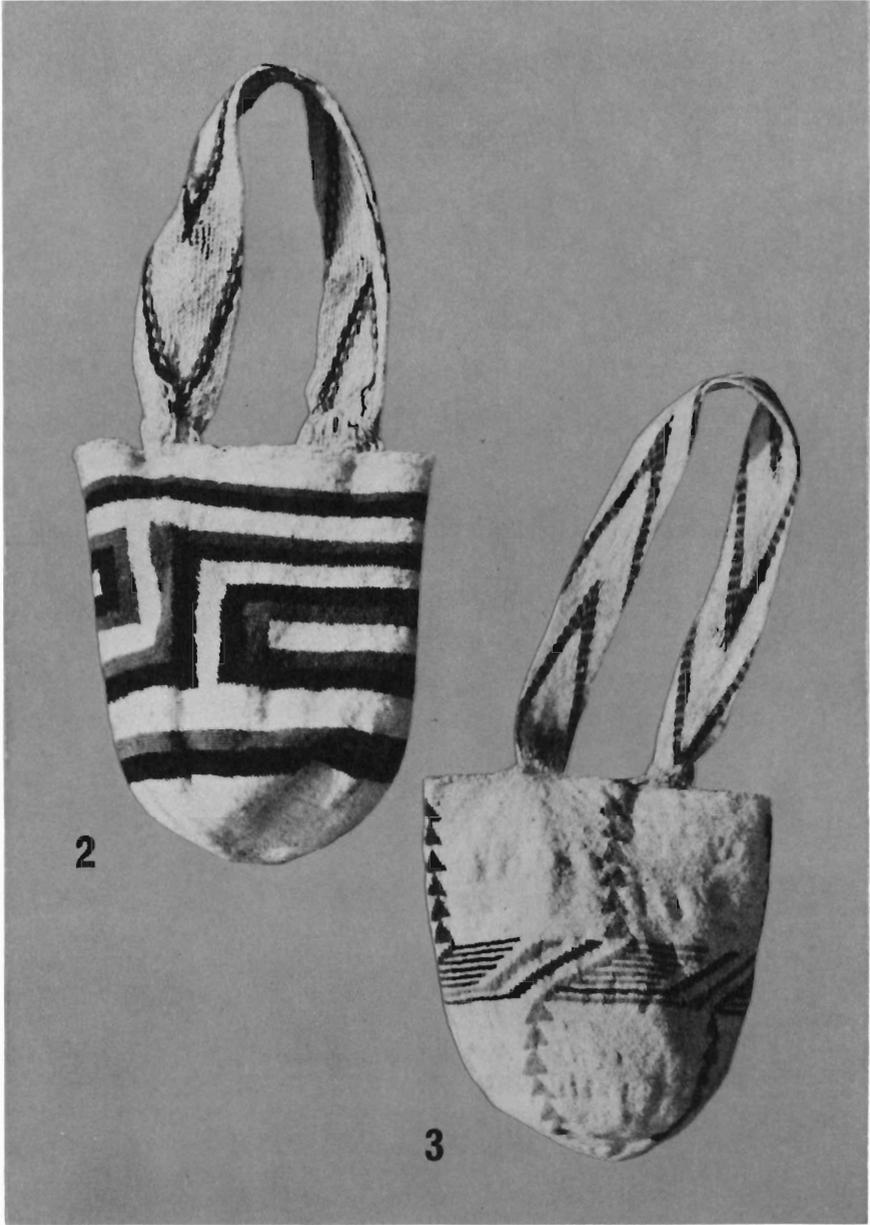
Fig. 14: Attachment of woven strap to pouch of the Paezes and Guambianos.

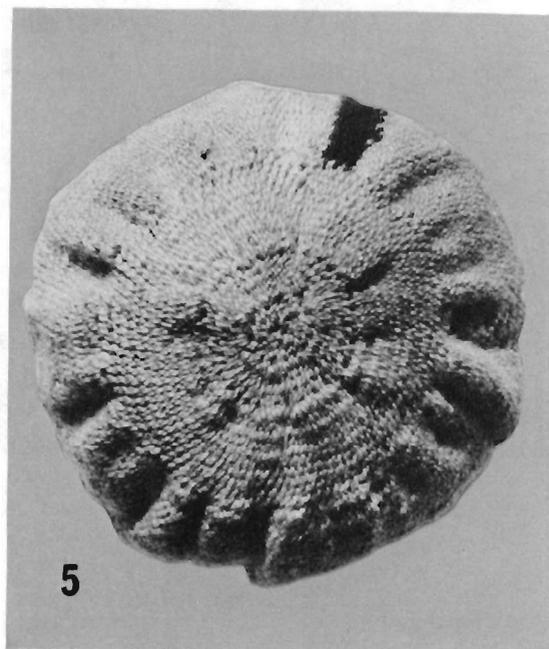
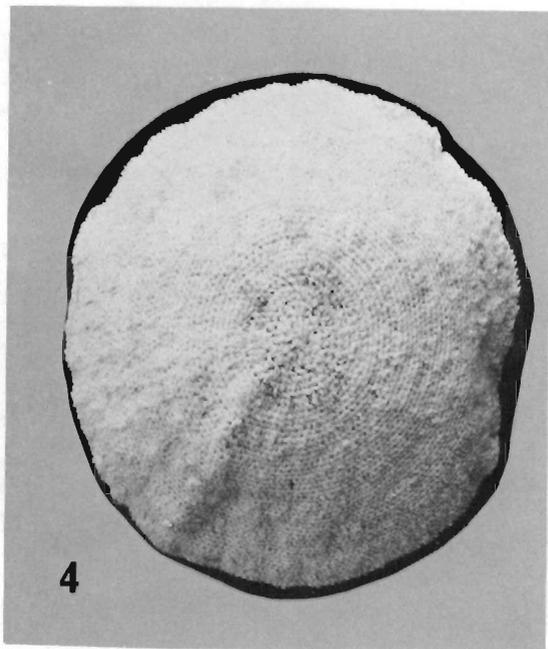
Fig. 15: Border stitch of the Paeces and Guambianos.

Fig. 16: Synoptic scheme of fabrication of pouch by simple linking. The lower section gives an impression how square and rectangular patterns can be produced. The upper section shows a triangular pattern in the making.



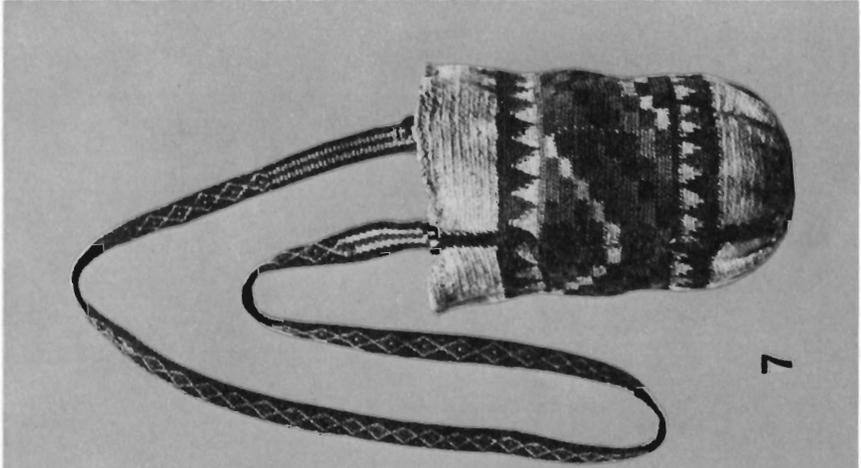
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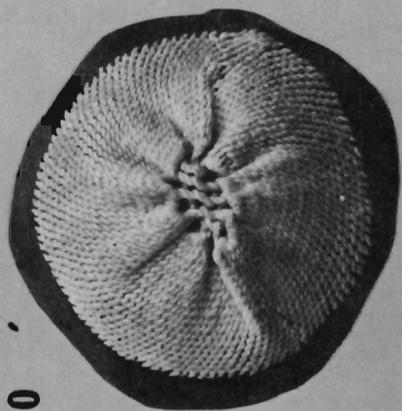




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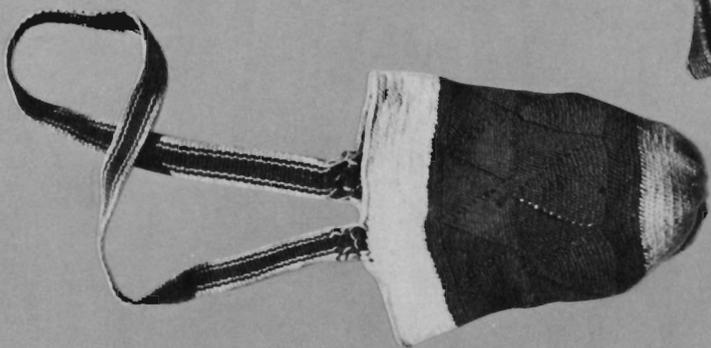
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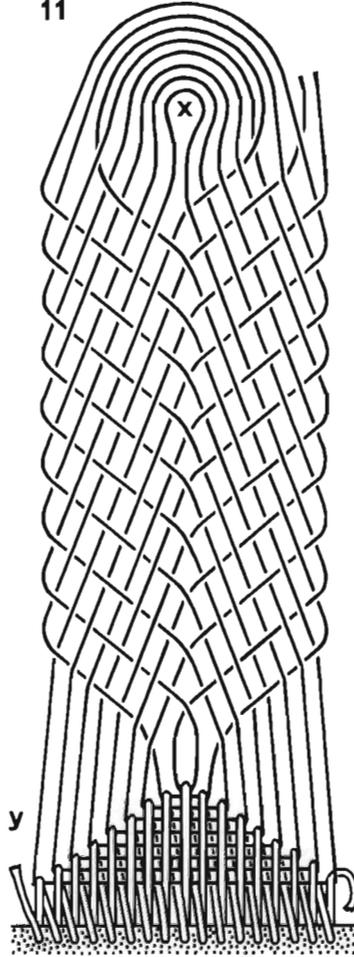


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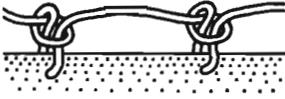


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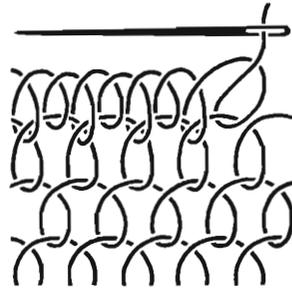
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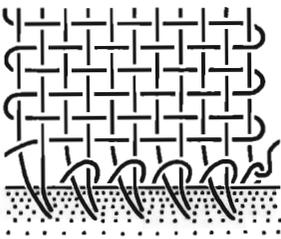
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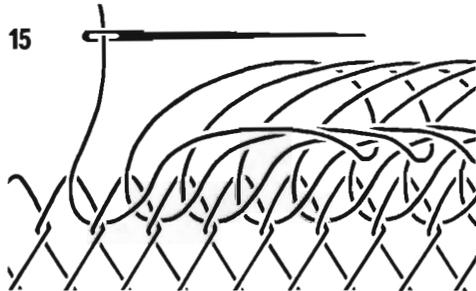
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