Ohlone Fiber Braiding

The making of cordage (a rope or strand that is braided or twisted into a larger form) was a foundation of Ohlone technology. Plant fibers were used by the Ohlone to create cordage for the creation of necessary everyday objects such as hunting tools, baskets, shelter, and clothing. Two basic ways to make a cord is through braiding or twisting.

At the time Ohlone could not go to the hardware store and buy supplies like they can today. Everything they needed had to be gathered and created from nature. Fibers were gathered from a variety of different plants such as Willow, Dogbane, Milkweed, Iris, and Tule to name a few.

Activity:

Today's activity will give you a chance to make your own cordage!

Most people today do not have access to plant fibers or the ability to harvest them. For those of you at home look for string, yarn, pipe cleaners, shoe laces, long thin pieces of fabric, or anything you can braid or twist together. Be creative!

Cut 3 pieces of your fiber (any amount over 10 inches will work for practice) and tie them together in a knot at one end. See example using pipe cleaners below.

Next, it helps to fasten the knotted end to something while you work with the rest of the material. If you are working with string, yarn, or pipe cleaners you can tape the end to a table to hold it in place. If you are working with larger material you can use a safety pin to attach the knotted end to a secure surface.
Step 3. Now you are ready to begin braiding!

Step 4. Separate fibers into three individual strands (left, middle, right).

Step 5. Take the left strand and cross it over the middle one. (In the picture below that would be dark brown over green).

Step 6. Take the right strand and cross it over the new middle strand (tan over dark brown) and then the left over the new middle strand (green over tan) as shown below.
Step 7. Keep crossing and alternating all the way down the fibers. Be sure to pull the braid tightly with each stitch! **Tip:** Keep all 3 fibers in your hands to have better control of your braid. Once you are finished you can tie ends together to make a bracelet!

Another way to make cordage is from **twisting** the fibers:

1.) Take 2 fiber strands and twist each of them by rolling them in the same direction.
2.) Once you have twisted each fiber, then combine them by holding them together and rotating each end separately in the opposite direction of each other. Keep twisting until eventually a kink forms in the middle. If you continue to twist the kink will become another twisted strand or a doubled cord which is stronger and more durable.

**Tip:** The double twist works best when NOT using pipe cleaners. With pipe cleaners one twist is all that is necessary.
Today, rope (cordage) and plant fibers are still used in everyday life.  

*Can you think of a few things in your life that are made from plant fibers?*

Did you know your clothes are made of fibers such as cotton or linen?  

*Where do you think cotton comes from?*

The cotton used to make clothing is gathered from a plant!  

Cotton fibers are gathered and twisted together to make them stronger. Once they are twisted into a string (or very fine cord) then they can be woven into material that is used to make the clothes we wear. Today most of this done for us on machines instead of by hand.  

Everyone today, including the Ohlone, rely on using things made from plant fibers that have been woven together in some way. Along with using fibers in a “modern” way, the Ohlone still practice their cultural way of making cordage to create baskets and other items. Hopefully this way of creating from plants will continue to be passed on to future generations of Ohlone for a very long time.