

THE LEARNING CIRCLE

by Loren Woerpel, Noc Bay Trading Company

WOMEN'S SHAWL

Today the most common construction of women's shawls across Indian country uses nylon chainette string to form the fringe on the hems of the shawl. This material is popular because of the large variety of colors available, it's relatively low cost, and the graceful way it hangs.

Specific shawl decorations vary by regional areas and by tribal designs, but the way the chainette fringe is added to the shawls has become more or less universal. The instructions here will assist you with the basic techniques needed to complete a shawl.

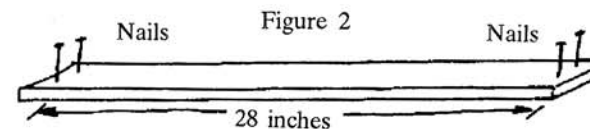
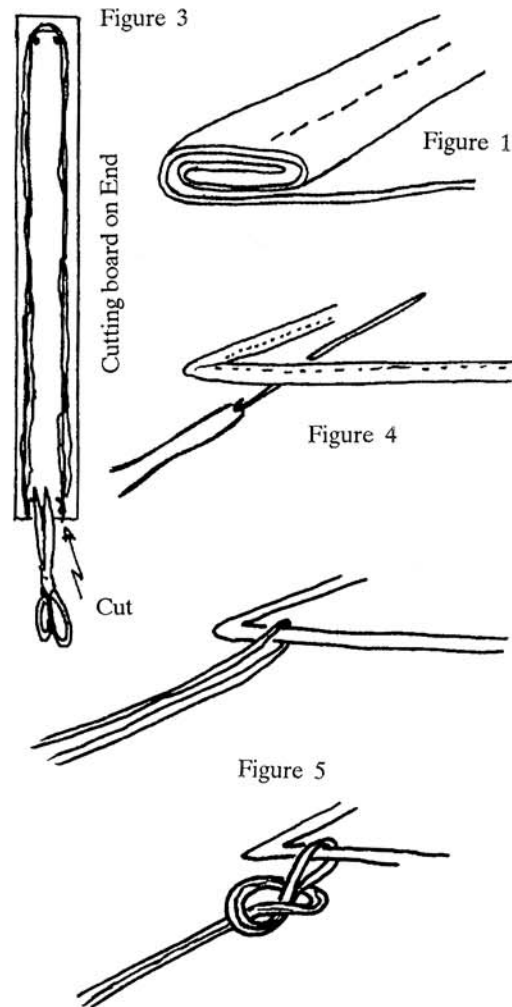
Material used for the shawl works best if it is fairly wrinkle resistant. The size of adult shawls during the past several decades usually consisted of about 2 yards of 60 inch material. The 60 inch dimension is the width of the shawl for an adult. These were fringed all the way around the hem and when worn were folded about in half. Often then, two rows of fringe were seen when the dancer was viewed from the back.

Recently, the shawl dancers have shortened the length of their shawls, often using 45 inch wide material, only fringing three sides. Many traditional women dancers have followed this trend.

The 45 inch dimension is the length of the shawl and the width is cut to fit the wearer, usually about 60 inches for an adult. The top hem is not fringed, but turned under slightly when worn over the shoulders. This makes a lighter shawl and not quite so hot when dancing in warm temperatures.

The traditional way to size the width of shawl needed is to stretch out your arms side to side, shoulder height and measure the distance from left finger tips to right finger tips. The shawl should be wide enough to hide your hands as you grasp both side hems with arms nearly out stretched and the shawl over your shoulders.

Cut the shawl to the desired size, allowing for the hem. Turn over the hem and sew as shown in Figure 1.



For these instructions we will assume you will be making 14 inch long fringe, which is the most common length. Make a fringe cutting board will help you save a lot of time preparing the fringe for tying. Follow Figure 2 and build a cutting board. Nails are driven into a piece of board at a slight angle.

Wind chainette fringe from a spool around the nails of the cutting board about 20 or 30 times. Prop the board upright and cut through all of the fringe string between the bottom two nails. See Figure 3. Repeat this as you need fringe.

The next step is to tie the fringe strands along the hem of the shawl. For this purpose, we suggest using a crochet hook large enough to hook the chainette string, but not the shawl fabric as you pull the chainette through the material.

The fringe is tied every 3/8 inch along the hem. Insert the point of the crochet hook through the shawl material behind the hem as in Figure 4. Take one piece of chainette from the cutting board. Catch its center point with the crochet hook and pull the chainette back through the material. Pull the strands until they are even, and tie all the strands together with an overhand knot as shown in Figure 5. When tightening the knot, push it up towards the hem so it hangs about 1/8th inch away from the hem.

Notice that two of the four fringe in this tied bundle are connected. After finishing one whole side of the shawl, take a sharp scissors and cut each of these parts of the bundles free.

The tying operation will go faster if you can drape the shawl over a frame, table, or bed so you can use both hands freely.

Nylon chainette fringe will fray over time from use, so some shawl makers use Fray Check or Super Glue to keep the ends from unraveling. Put a small drop on the end of each fringe.

Today, many shawl makers are decorating their shawls by using fabric paints. Just follow the directions on the paint package. Ribbon applique also may be used for designs.

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