

Baskets of The Comcaac

Weaving Memory and the Future¹

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The limberbush branches, the raw materials, are gathered in the desert: the women go out alone or in family groups, either walking or organizing themselves to go in a pick-up truck.

The Seris or Comcaac, as they call themselves, are an indigenous people of approximately 900 individuals living in the towns of Punta Chueca (Socaix), in the municipality of Hermosillo, and El Desemboque del Río San Ignacio (or El Desemboque de los Seris) (Haxöl lihom), in the municipality of Pitiquito, both along the Gulf of California coast in the state of Sonora, Mexico. They speak Seri or Cmiique Iitom, Spanish, and in some cases, English. In their daily lives they speak Cmiique Iitom, which is how they transmit the important information for explaining everything involved in the creation of a basket.

Until the early twentieth century, Seri baskets were the most important household objects for the women who wove them. They were used to transport cactus fruit, blankets, and fish; as kitchen utensils; and even as musical instruments and a bride's dowry. However, in the course of the twentieth

century, the Seris' lifestyle, based on hunting, fishing, and gathering, as well as their social organization, changed, and with it, so did the role of basket-weaving. In El Desemboque, one of the main sources of women's economic earnings is the sale of basket wares. In addition to caring for their families and doing the housework and, in some cases, gathering food in the desert, some women spend a large part of their days at this task. In addition to their economic value, the baskets continue to be one of the most important objects in their lives. Their continuing manufacture contrasts with the other objects the Seris stopped making over the last century, among them ceramic figurines, bows and arrows, and rafts made of cane and wood.

PREPARING THE MATERIAL FOR WEAVING A BASKET

To weave a basket, they must first gather desert limberbush (*haat*) branches, burn them to remove the bark, process different qualities of fibers, prepare the dyes, dye the fibers, and create the designs. The branches are gathered in the desert: the women go out alone or in family groups, either walking

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Processing the fibers requires tactile knowledge to recognize textures and sight to distinguish a certain shine and opacity that define their quality.

or organizing themselves to go in a pick-up truck. In addition to having to identify the bushes and selecting them for branch length and straightness, they gather medicinal and edible plants while out in the desert. When they go out in a group, they usually protect themselves by calling out their names when they move out sight of each other.

On returning to the village, they prepare a fire to remove the bark from the branches. Sometimes the men who accompany them or the women themselves gather the firewood, preferably dried limerbush root and jumping cholla or *cote-exoj*, since they burn very hot and evenly. Burning the branches requires sophisticated technical knowledge to be able to recognize the plant's odor, color, and sound. Without that knowledge, the inside of the branch would be burned, damaging the raw material. Each weaver has her own favorite technique, but generally speaking, the women take the bark off the branches from the bottom to the top by holding the branch in their teeth and creating sufficient tension with the hands to peel off a long ribbon in a single movement. The teeth and the mouth are basic tools in the production of these baskets; this frees the hands up and allows them to produce long, evenly shaped strips of fiber.

In the places where the weaving materials are processed and the weaving itself is done, relatives and friends alike gather; amidst conversations and meals, they exchange techniques and practices, as well as motifs for their designs. These are also places and occasions for gathering and visiting, where relatives, neighbors, and friends come together to talk and sometimes exchange or sell each other baskets or necklaces.

Once the bark has been stripped off the branches, they must be washed in sea water since, as the women from El Desemboque warned, using fresh water could cause the basket to rot. Tools are also important. The weavers use two kinds of awls when processing the fibers and in the weaving, one made of deer bone, known as *ziix icoop*, and another made of metal. Some women, like Raquel Hoeffler, emphasized their preference for the bone awl because it does not rot the fibers and because the quality of the weave is better.

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Photo courtesy of the Lutsuc Asociación Cultural I.A.P., www.lutsuc.org.

opacity that define their quality. Since we are outsiders to this indigenous group, language has been one way of approaching this wealth of knowledge, and we present here some important terms.

The branches are first divided in half and an intense yellow fiber found in their center, called *zee*, is extracted, since if it is left in, the weave would rot. Then, along the length of the branch, the top of each half is removed, called *ipocj itac*, literally meaning “the backbone.” This is how the first classification of fiber, between the *ipocj itac* (the exterior of the branch) and the *zee* (the inside of the branch), is produced. The women process the inside part first. This processing of the fibers is described using the root of the verb *azee* in Cmique litom, which literally means “making *zee*.” *Zee* is the name they give these fibers at the time of weaving,

Each woman has a formula for dyeing and weaving, which is her personal signature. Every basket is unique.

despite the fact that during the process of separating the fibers, they call them *iteelaj*, or “edges,” perhaps referring to the edge of the branch. These fibers are characteristically hard, rigid, and stiff and are used for the fiber bundle that is later wrapped to form the coil of the basket. The second process consists of separating the fibers from the top of the branch into two types, both hard and shiny, that will be used to wrap the fiber bundle. They are classified into *ipocj itac* and *izquipot*. Once the fibers have been separated, they are put into their corresponding groups and separated into a roll, or *hamizj*.



When the fibers are processed, they can then be dyed. The first baskets with designs, and therefore with fibers possibly dyed the red-brown *heepol*, were reported from the early twentieth century. Since the mid-twentieth century, Seri women have multiplied the techniques for producing dyes, particularly black, as can be seen in some museum collections. However, as Berta Estrella and Francisca Morales say, the color they achieved was reddish. They experimented on dyeing techniques using crepe paper and finally with aniline dyes, which produced the beauty and quality they were looking for. Despite the fact that they can still recreate processes like the *haat ah hipool*, as Angelita Torres did in El Desemboque in winter 2014, producing black dyes using saltbush leaves and oxides, they prefer aniline. Beyond anilines' being practical, however, the appreciation of the beauty of their baskets and the recognition of both the artists' personal creativity and tradition is fundamental to them, which is why the technique for dyeing the materials in the red-brown color (*heepol*), despite its complexity, is a favorite among the weavers.

Each woman has a formula for doing it because it is her personal signature. Every basket is unique despite being part

of shared knowledge; and they are recognizable by their technique and quality in both the national and international markets.

WEAVING A BASKET

Seri basketry is woven using simple coiling with open spaced wraps or more closely spaced wraps, wrapping the fiber bundle as it is rolled counter-clockwise. The bundle is perforated from the outside of the piece, creating the same design on both sides with similar quality in the weaving. Whether coiled (*cōhacapnij*) or interlocking (*ihafiz*), every basket starts with a knot

Once the knot has been made, the outside of the weave is punctured with the awl. The top of the knot is perforated and every stitch introduces a fiber that covers the roll until it forms a spiral creating the base for the basket (*hahíti*). To weave, the knot is held in the left hand while the right hand constantly dampens the fibers with seawater and perforates

the roll at the top with the awl. A fiber is introduced into the hole to then be able to weave the outside of the roll with it; with that, the handful of fibers is covered, squeezing it and maintaining the tension both on the weave and the roll itself. The aim is to maintain the rhythm of perforation to create a uniform covering, producing a continuous weave from beginning to end. To finish a basket, the fibers are gradually cut so that the volume of the inside of the roll slowly diminishes. The artist continues weaving with that roll until it disappears. The main kinds of baskets made are in the form of a plate (*hasaj*), in the form of a pot (*haat hanoohcö*), or, less frequently, a giant basket (*saptim*) since it takes anywhere from a year to a year and a half to make one.

DESIGNS AND MEMORY

Baskets with and without designs are made in the same way. The knot and the basket base are the beginning, and starting from there the weavers define their distribution and position. When shown photographs of some of the baskets found in national and international museums, the El Desemboque weavers admired their beauty and emphasized that, in con-

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trast with the women from the past, they process fibers with which they make miniature baskets, or earrings or pendants. Proud of their expertise, they also underline the quality of the dyes they have produced and perfected with time. The designs are each artist's personal signature, and that is how they recognize certain baskets, sometimes showing photographs of their mothers, aunts, or sisters holding those same ones. They tell stories of how they conceived of the design and then showed it to other women, building together through teaching, one woman to another, as part of their tradition. The designs hold memories of their mothers, aunts, sisters, sisters-in-law, or women they have never met, but whom they could relate to by recreating their designs in a new basket.

SALES

Weaving a design that the El Desemboque artists considered old or traditional is an expression of a tie through direct experience or word-of-mouth that links them to the women who had woven them in the past; this can increase the basket's value. At the same time, it has opened up a space for continuing to create this tradition because they have nourished it and innovated around it by leaving their own personal mark on the baskets they wove. This warp on which tradition and commercialization are woven spreads locally to the tourism networks of Bahía Kino and Hermosillo. Institutions dedicated to commercializing and promoting crafts in Mexico participate in wider networks, like Fonart and Conaculta. One of the most important basket-selling networks in El Desemboque links these women to commerce in the southern United States, where their pieces are appreciated for their technique and the process and quality of the weaves. Taken all together, this has made it possible for these baskets to continue to be the most important objects in their lives, a way of generating income and of transmitting knowledge and part of their tradition, to which they contribute their creativity and transformation. **MM**

NOTES

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