

The Art of Weaving in Caves

Elsie Montiel*



Campeche is a prodigious land. A glance at its history shows us a region rich in culture. The mark left by the ancient Mayans in innumerable archaeological sites narrates a majestic past; its capital, surrounded by pieces of walls and bastions, is a chronicle in stone of a time when pirates crisscrossed the seas terrorizing the cities and towns whose economic dynamism was clear for all to see. Its historic downtown's well preserved lay-out and architecture exists side by side with a modern city, offering a good example of what well-planned conservation can achieve. So, in many ways, Campeche is unique as a state. One of those ways is its production of items made out of jipi palm, products that at first glance belie their laboriousness and special attributes.

“Jipi” is short for the name originally given to the fine hats woven from a dwarf palm in the town of Jipijapa in Ecuador. These hats are made in several South American countries, but the largest center for production and export has been Panama, which is why they are known as “Panama hats.”

Campeche's Calkiní municipality is the only place in Mexico where jipis are woven. The communities of Béal, Santa Cruz Exhacienda, San Nicolás and Tankuché —particularly the first— are famous for its articles made of jipi palm leaves.

To make crafts with this palm leaf, which used to be plentiful in the region, first a rigorous selection of plant seedlings is made before their leaves open up, since only the seedling, better known as the *cogollo*, can be used for weaving. Each plant produces three *cogollos* a year, and you need 10 *cogollos* to make a hat. A week before the artisans start working with them, the *cogollos* are processed with sulphur smoke and then put outside for the sun to

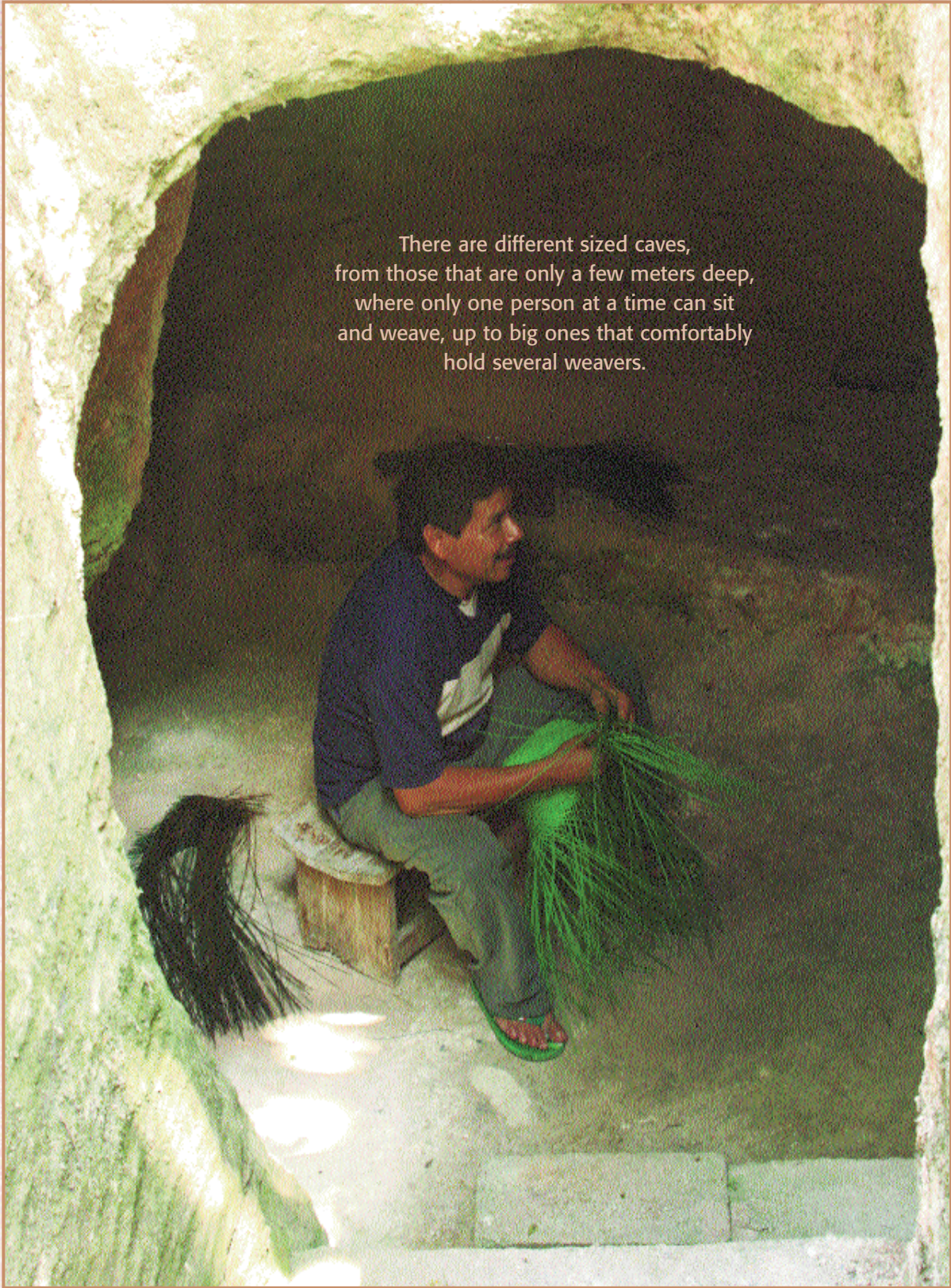
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Photo previous page: Jorge L. Borroto, courtesy of the State of Campeche Tourism Office (cto).



Mauricio Degollado

Campeche's towns of Béal, Santa Cruz, San Nicolás and Tankuché are the only places in Mexico where jipis are woven.



There are different sized caves,
from those that are only a few meters deep,
where only one person at a time can sit
and weave, up to big ones that comfortably
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Photos this page by Elsie Montiel

The entrance to a cave.

Jipi can only be woven in natural or manmade caves, lit by reflected sunlight, since humidity and temperature are fundamental for handling the materials.



The cogollo.



The splits or "partidas".

bleach them white. Then, some of them are dyed with chemical or natural dyes, adding color and beauty to the final crafts. The *jipi* fibers must be extremely humid when woven to ensure that they do not break since they are very thin and narrow. They can be woven very fine so they are practically waterproof.

To weave it, the *cogollo* is separated into thin strands that can then be cut or “split” twice, three times or up to four times. The “split” is a longitudinal cut made on the palm leaf to get two, three or four “strings”. The refinement and difficulty in making a piece will depend on the thickness of the strands it is made with. Rita María, a weaver from Béal, explains it like this: “It is just as easy to weave a white palm as it is to weave a colored one. The difficult thing is weaving it when it is split very fine. Splitting is cutting with a needle. It’s called a ‘*partida*’ when it is of a natural thickness, but the splitting might divide the piece into two, three or even four lines, which makes the materials very fine, and the finer the split, the more days’ work it will be. A hat made of four splits takes us almost a month to weave. One that has only been split once takes a week.”¹

SETTING THE SCENE

The splitting, the curing with sulphur and the dyeing are the steps that have to be done before starting to work the *jipi*. But the most important—and at the same time, peculiar—thing is the place and working conditions: *jipi* can only be woven in natural or manmade caves, lit by reflected sunlight, since humidity and temperature are fundamental for handling the materials. As Rita María says, “You weave in those short times when there is a lot of light, when the sun comes into the cave. That’s when you do the finest work. You can’t use electric lights because they heat the place up and the slightest tug breaks the strands. The cave gives you the humidity you need. It can’t be too cold, either, because that also makes the strands brittle. That’s why you can’t use air conditioning either. The atmosphere has to be humid,



Jorge L. Borrero/cro



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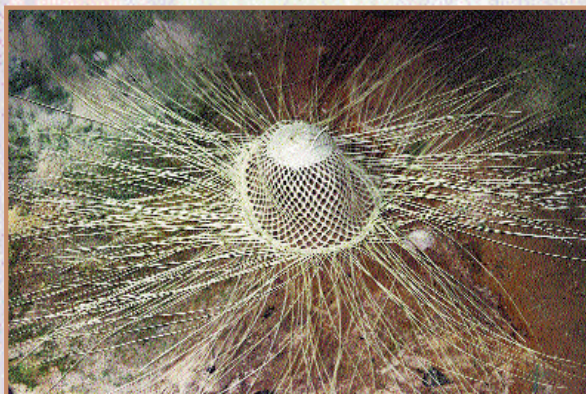
and the temperature right for working.” But once the piece is finished, it preserves the humidity. So, a well-made hat —or whatever piece has been woven— will be flexible and waterproof. It can be bent, pulled or wrinkled, and it will spring back into its original shape. This is a natural quality of the fiber, and it stays that way for the entire lifetime of the hat. And that’s not just any old thing these days.

The movement of the sun regulates the work day, the number of hours given over to weaving. “The sun’s reflection inside the cave is what helps us. If it’s cloudy, we have to leave.” Rosa María’s husband talks about his workplace like it was an office. “We go in, let’s say, at eight or nine. I get off at one to eat lunch and I come back in the afternoon until the sun goes down.” The work is tiring. They spend many hours sitting in the same position in very humid conditions, but the skill in their hands is clear as they continue moving with precision while their owners talk to the visitor.

The quality of the pieces lies in the manual skill, the kind of palm and the design. Four-*partida* hats are the most difficult. “You weave and you weave and you don’t get anywhere because you have to tighten it at the same time and it gets tiny again. So you have to keep weaving until it gets to be the right size.” The four-*partida* hats cost between 1,200 and 1,800 pesos (US\$110-165), depending on the quality of the weaving. The cheapest kind of hat is woven from one-*partida* palm fibers, and costs about 150 pesos (US\$13).

The finished product is a round hat. It is later, in the press, that it is formed and given a size, which is when it is also decided whether it is a lady’s or a gentleman’s hat. The lady’s hat requires more effort because more design, cuts and molding go into it. Hats are the best known items, but they also make earrings, bracelets, rosaries, handbags and baskets of all sizes.

In Bécacal, jipis are a family business. Quite a few families have their own cave in their backyard, carved out of the *sascab* (also known as “decomposed limestone”), soft rock and limestone. Most family members know the secrets of the trade, or cooperate in one way or another. Of course, there are different sized caves, from those that are only a few meters deep, where only



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one person at a time can sit and weave, up to big ones that comfortably hold several weavers. Sometimes, “they even have a TV,” as Rosa María’s husband says.

Like in all the manual arts, the skills are learned very young, handed down from grandparents and parents. At 11 or 12, children already know how to weave simple items. The town has weavers’ organizations, led by the women. “My organization started out with 50 families, but it’s we women who are responsible for turning in the work every week. Now there are 35 of us because, since they opened up *maquiladora* plants, several women went to work in them. My whole family weaves, but we women are the ones responsible for handing out the work to the group. That is, if a family is supposed to produce 10 hats in a week, we have to organize the weavers’ work in the family so that it’s finished on time.”

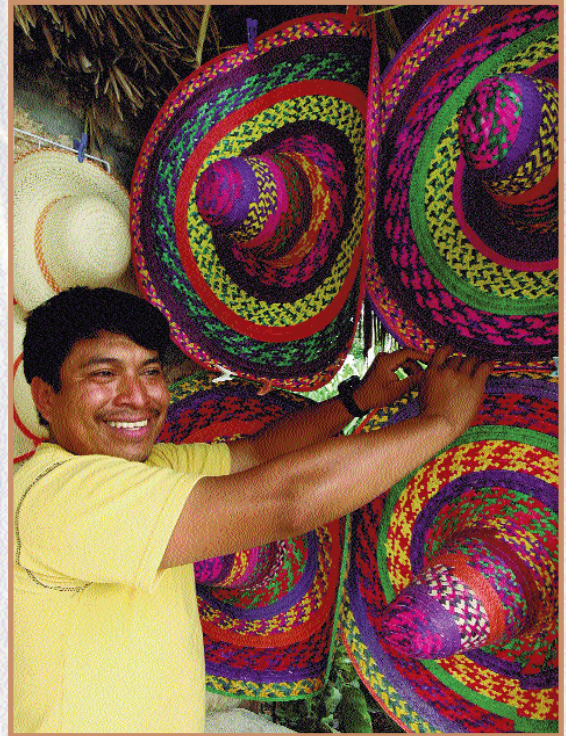
In Mexico, like elsewhere in the world, these tropical hats are very sought after, not only because they protect your head and keep you cool, but also because they look beautiful and elegant on whoever wears them. Globalization has not come to this municipality, however: *jipi* products are only sold directly in the local market because national and foreign trade is done through intermediaries. “Now there are different points of sale: a tourist area at the edge of town. During vacation times, tourists come into town, and we also get invited to go to tourism fairs and we sell wholesale, but we don’t export. The hats are sold abroad, but we don’t do that directly. Some people who visit us and are familiar with our work put in orders, but that’s not all the time.”

It is said that the jipi craft making was brought in the middle of the last century from Bécal,² by the García family to turn it into a traditional skill. Though the ups and downs of the craft economy has led many men and women to turn to other economic activities to survive, an enormous fountain shaped like three hats in the town's main plaza seems to remind visitors that the authentic Bécal hat has an original, exclusive touch that can only come from being one of the few articles that has defeated mass production. Not even with the most refined technology could these hats ever be made by a machine. **MM**

NOTES

¹ All quotes are taken from a personal interview with Rita María, a crafts-woman living in Bécal, on June 14, 2007.

² Bécal is in the municipality of Calkiní, about 100 kilometers from the city of Campeche, on the federal highway to Mérida.



Jorge L. Borrado/CRU