NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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July 14, 1971

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

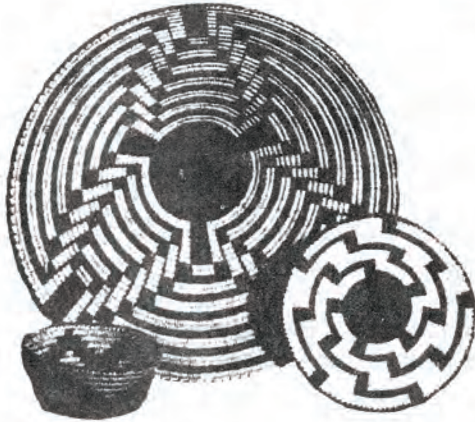
Early in April, I decided to spend some time in Arizona with my friend Woody Wickham, who had just started an Institute fellowship inquiring into the condition of North American Indians. Everything about his description of the area had intrigued me, and his mention of the possibility that I might learn the ancient art of basket-weaving from "the Papago grandmothers who sit weaving under the trees" severed the last threads of resistance that had been binding me to the East Coast.

The grandmother in charge of the tribe's extensive basket-weaving operations does not work under the shade of a tree. Her shop in Sells (the "capital" of the Papago Reservation) is equipped with an air conditioner of dubious dependability and a comfortably upholstered chair. Her husband once assured me that although the traditional position for the weaving of baskets is cross-legged on the ground, no one can sit that way any more for very long. Posture is one of many traditions surrounding the manufacture of Papago baskets that have been either altered or lost over the last three or four decades. The changes have affected everything from the materials used to the motifs decorating the thousands of baskets made and sold by the Papagos each year.

When Woody introduced himself to Mrs. Manuel and asked her if she would be willing to teach a friend of his how to weave baskets, she replied, "Many people have said they wish to learn weaving from me. No one ever comes. I will teach her, if I have time." We understood that this condition was her polite way of reserving the right to change her mind. We admired her good judgment. On my first visit I sat across from her and watched her weaving a flat wall decoration, about three feet in diameter, depicting Itoi-Ki, the man-in-the-maze. We sat for many hours. At intervals, without breaking the steady rhythm of her stitch, she would explain the rudiments of basketry.

Most Southwestern Indian baskets are fashioned by tightly lacing together coils of long, tough grasses with the supple fibers of one of a variety of plants. Traditionally, the Desert People--Pimas and Papagos--used tule stems for the coils or warp of their baskets, and stitched these together with a weft of young willow branches or green cat tails. The graceful, round baskets that served the desert tribes for centuries had to be woven tight enough to hold water and strong enough to withstand great heat. They were often used to parch wheat and cook gruel using live coals or heated

rocks. Employing the same coil technique, the Indians wove storage baskets large and sturdy enough to hold fifty bushels of grain. To give added strength to the center of the household basket, it was always stitched with a tough, black, leathery plant known as devil's claw. From this black center, the devil's claw stitches flared out, contrasting with the ivory willow twigs in a rich variety of intricate designs.



Papago baskets are no longer woven of tule stems and willow twigs. The coil or warp is made of split bear grass, tough, spiny leaves that grow three or four feet above the ground in great clusters. The coils are stitched together with the leaves of the yucca plant, which has a thick, shaggy trunk and long, pointed green leaves radiating from the top. The green leaves grow from a central core or bud of white leaves that looks very much like a Belgian endive.

It is difficult to determine exactly when the Papagos began using yucca for their baskets. An anthropological study of the Papagos done in 1916 suggests the year 1890. There is little doubt that the baskets made of yucca flourished in direct proportion to the bourgeoning tourist trade in the area. Yucca baskets cannot be made tight enough to hold water. Neither are they strong enough to cook in. It is therefore improbable that yucca baskets were ever intended for use in the home, and for many years the Papagos continued to weave willow baskets for their own use.

Mrs. Manuel did not offer to let me start a basket with the materials neatly bundled on the floor around her. Instead, she carefully explained to me that the white yucca leaves are obtained by reaching in through the sharp outer blades, and pulling the bud out whole. The green leaves

can simply be cut off at the base. She demonstrated how the edges are trimmed before each leaf is split and set outside to dry.

Years ago, Yucca grew on the reservation. Now, Mrs. Manuel told me, you have to travel more than sixty miles along the Benson Highway in order to find a place where yucca is plentiful. A good thirty miles past Benson towards Willcox the bear grass grows. Willow, she told me, can no longer be found anywhere in the region.

The following day, Woody and I drove along the Benson Highway and found yucca growing in great profusion. Many of the plants had already been relieved of their white buds, but we found several with the central cores still intact, and suffered only minor injuries from the needle-like tips of the green, outer leaves. The sun was setting by the time we started towards Willcox. Thirty miles further on, just as darkness and despair were overtaking us, we spotted a clump of bear grass silhoutted on a hill. Woody scaled some intervening barbed wire, cut a huge armful of the leaves, and suffered with perfect equanimity the cuts inflicted by their jagged edges.

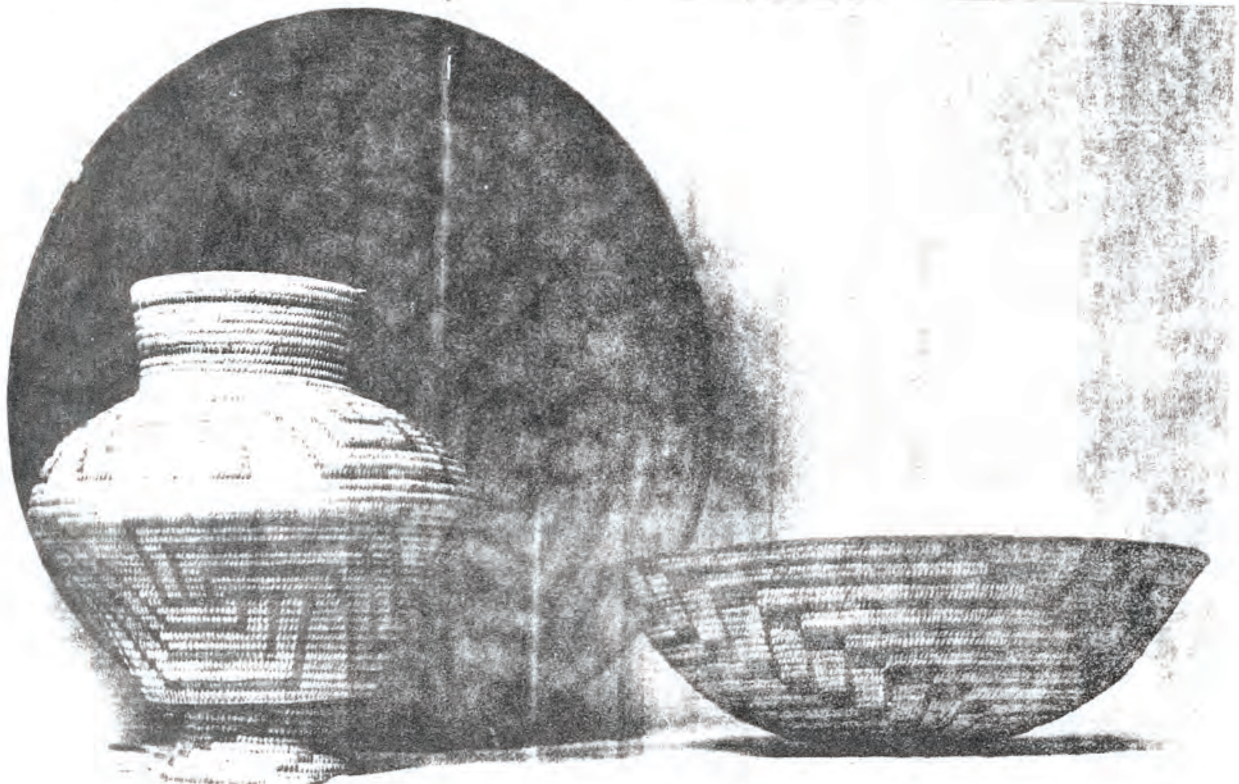
When I arrived in Sells the next morning with the precious harvest, Mrs. Manuel was surprised and delighted that I had been willing to start at the very beginning by gathering my own materials. Half of what we'd picked, I said, was for her, in partial payment for her instruction. We set to work preparing the grasses.

Three tools are needed for the many preliminary steps and for the actual weaving of a basket: an awl (now of steel, formerly a cactus spine), a knife, and a mallet for pounding the coils flat. After sorting the yucca leaves and discarding those too short to be practical, the point of the awl is inserted along the edge of each yucca leaf, and the loose edges stripped away. Then the leaf is split in half and, if it is a cream-colored inner leaf, laid in the sun to bleach, or, if green, set to dry in the shade along with the bear grass. The trimmed edges of the leaves are bundled separately for use in the beginning of the basket. After three or four days, when the leaves have thoroughly dried, they are soaked in water and wrapped in a cloth for several hours, making them supple enough to wind around the bear grass without splitting.

Just before a leaf is used, its thick underside is removed. This is accomplished by biting onto the base

of the leaf and holding it taut with one hand, while using the knife to shave the surface with the other. "People always tell me I'm going to cut off my nose one day," Mrs. Manuel told me through clenched teeth, "but I never do."

By the afternoon, having finished the preliminaries and set the fresh leaves aside to dry, Mrs. Manuel took four dampened yucca leaves from the roll on her lap, and wove them into a simple grid. The loose ends which protruded were then split and tucked under one another in a circular pattern. To the loose ends of these leaves she added a bunch of the yucca trimmings. Then she punched a hole with her awl through the edge of the grid, stuck the needle-end of a long piece of green yucca through it, and handed me the beginning of a basket.



Papago basketry has undergone several transformations that may account for its survival. All over the Southwest the native Indian crafts are dying out. Collectors and anthropologists predict the rapid decline of Indian pottery bead-work, weaving and basketry, frequently citing tribes in which only one or two old people still practice the ancient techniques. The Papagos themselves have recently

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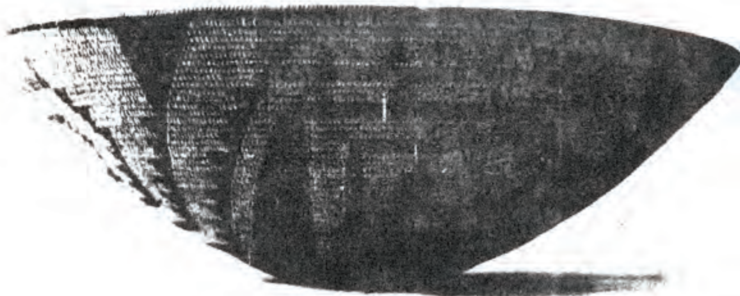
The Arizona Pioneers Historical Society kindly allowed me to photograph baskets from their collection.

lost the last of their potters, and with her a craft that had been practiced for centuries. That a craft should die out when there is no longer any need for the objects it produces is not remarkable. What is remarkable is that the Papagos were able to resist this trend, and conscientiously to create a renaissance in basket-



weaving. Since the 1940's, the Papagos have produced more baskets than any other tribe in the country, at least 8,000 baskets annually during the 1960's, and have come to rely on their craft as an important supplement to the family income.

Because the new yucca leaves are coarser than willow twigs, the intricate old designs can no longer be executed. Also, in response to the ever-growing tourist demand for lower-priced baskets, a new style of basket has recently begun to appear in great numbers. The stitches of these baskets do not overlap to cover the bear grass coils entirely, but run in a lacey, diagonal pattern that takes far less time to execute. But even a small split-stitch basket takes from twelve to fifteen hours to weave, and, since it brings a lower price, compensates its maker at the rate of about fifteen cents an hour.

Traditional willow baskets were always made in the same broad, shallow shape. Flat-bottom baskets with straight, upright sides were made for tourists. (Indians had no use for wastepaper baskets or magazine holders.) The Papagos today make at least half their baskets in these non-traditional shapes, and have diversified recently into novelty baskets shaped like turtles or little dolls, which are increasingly popular in the trading posts.

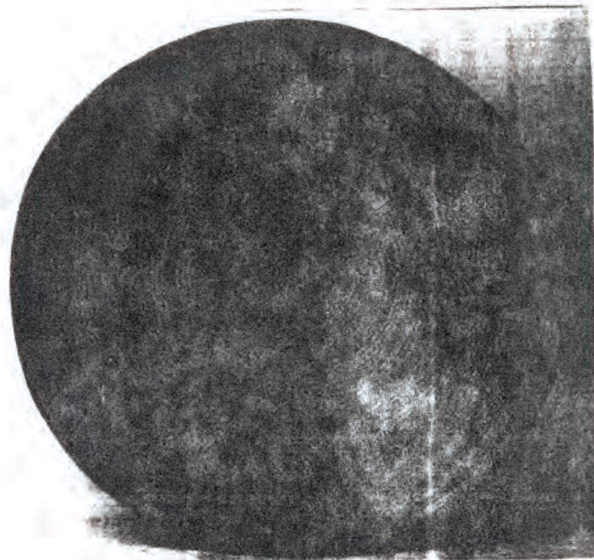
Modern Papago baskets have gained in variety and ease of production at the expense of delicacy, detail, and proportion. Traditional baskets, made of willow and decorated with the ancient squash blossom or tarantula designs, have vanished into the museums and houses of collectors. Occasionally a new one may be found, woven by a Pima, and costing upwards of seventy-five dollars.

But however beautiful the traditional baskets are, it would be an error to disparage the modern adaptations. A simple yucca basket takes less time and demands less skill than a willow one. That is why the Papagos' craft is flourishing, while the Pimas' is moribund. That the craft does flourish, and that virtually every Papago woman knows how to create a basket, I think adds richly to their lives.

A Papago creation myth tells of a flood that destroyed all living creatures except Coyote, Owl, Black Beetle, and the god Itoi, who is the Spirit of Goodness. In the

beginning, Itoi is sitting on top of his mountain weaving a basket on which he spreads the sap of the creosote bush to make it water-tight. One by one he tells the animals what they can do to save themselves when the water comes. Each one is advised to hold fast, fly high, or dig deep. Itoi himself shrinks, and rides above the flood in his basket.

It has seemed to me that the craft of making baskets is to the basket-makers a gift from the God who created them; that the craft itself is so magical in its simplicity that it must feel to the craftsman as though it has been conceived by a God and communicated to man complete in a vision. Itoi, the Spirit of Goodness who created the Papagos, was delivered from the flood by his divine ingenuity, the basket, which he passed along to his people. The basket remains for them a symbol of Superconsciousness, a mandala.



Sincerely,
Winifred Rosen
Winifred Rosen

Received in New York on July 21, 1971.