

The Temiche Cap

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Toward the end of the eighteenth century the German botanist Joseph Gaertner (1791: 468, *pl.* 2) obtained the spathe, spadix, rachillae, and flowers of a palm known in Neotropica as *temiche* (*timiche*, *timití*), *truli*, and *ubussú* (*bussu*). Characteristically, the entire inflorescence and large pendant infructescence of this palm is contained in a pouchlike cover, a feature Gaertner's chosen name, *Manicaria saccifera*, takes fittingly into account for both the genus and the species of the plant.¹ The *temiche* palm has since become known from Central America, the littoral of Colombia, the Orinoco Delta, the Guianas, Trinidad, and the lower Amazon (Moore 1973: 92, *pl.* 56). It is predominantly a palm of the tidal swamp but grows also along the marshy banks of the lower Amazon as far inland as the Río Negro and the Purus River.²

I have elsewhere given a comprehensive account of *Manicaria saccifera* and its cultural significance for the Warao Indians of the Orinoco Delta (Wilbert 1976). Here I shall concentrate on the spathe of the palm and the uses Indians make of it.

Writes Wallace (1853: 70), to whom we owe the first detailed description of the *temiche*, "The spathe . . . is much

valued by Indians, furnishing them with an excellent and durable cloth." It is fusiform and brown in color and provides a good-sized piece of fine, closely woven, seamless material. "When cut open longitudinally and pressed flat," continues Wallace, "it is used to preserve [the Indians'] delicate feather ornaments and gala dresses, which are kept in a chest of plaited palm leaves between layers of smooth 'bussu' cloth." Braun (1968: 111) also reports that the fibrous spathe of *temiche* is used as wrapping material and for loincloths. Oftentimes an entire spathe is employed as a carrying bag, and its lower half can be converted into a hoodlike cap.

Temiche caps are worn by Indians, Creoles, and tourists. They are sometimes referred to as "monkey caps," likening their wearers to East Indian bonnet macaques. However, the circumstance that outsiders sport *temiche* caps in jest or label them with gauche appellations should not detract from the fact that, in native context, the cap used to play the more serious role of a protective head covering. Since the *temiche* cap in its latter significance has not been adequately described, the present essay is presented to illustrate its rustic form and function.

Traditionally Warao Indians spend much time collecting food on open interfluvial savannas, producing stem starch from *moriche* palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) in more or less open *morchales*, and navigating the wide distributaries of their sun-drenched

¹ Derived from Lat. *manica*, "sleeve" and *saccifera*, "sack-bearing."

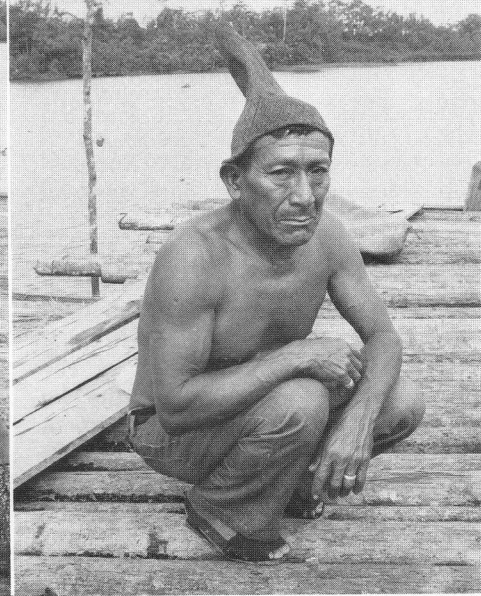
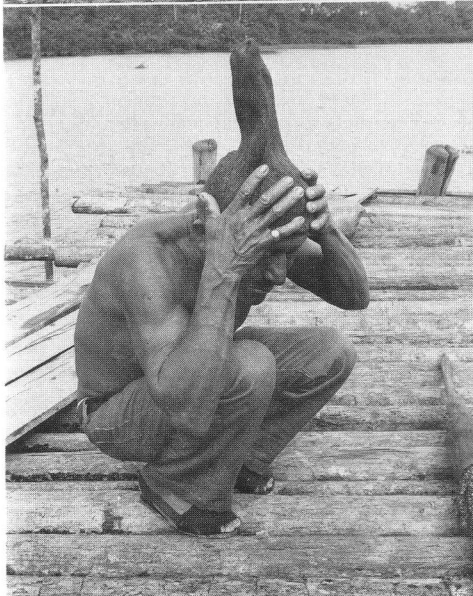
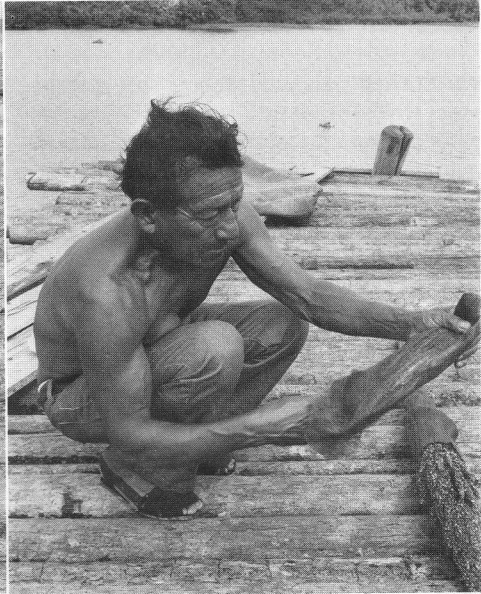
² Bailey 1943: 392-393; Standley and Steyermark 1958: 271-273 (Central America); Wessels Boer 1965a, b (Colombia, Guianas); Wilbert 1976 (Orinoco Delta); Bailey 1933: 405-413 (Trinidad); Burret 1928: 389 (Mouth of the Amazon); Wallace 1853: 70 (Río Negro, Amazon).



1. In making a *temiche* cap, an inflorescence of *Manicaria saccifera* with unruptured spathe is removed from the palm, the spathe is cut, and the top pulled off.

domain. Modern Warao spend also long hours clearing garden plots and tending shadeless rice fields. Whenever the sun bears down on them with

merciless intensity the Indians say, *hokohi ahera*, "the sun hurts." At outdoor work sites they implant a single *temiche* leaf or an entire row of them



2. The spathe is then turned inside out, shaped to the head with the fingers, and worn to give protection from the sun.

into the soft ground to protect themselves from the stinging rays and the weather. When traveling along the path or as idle passengers in a motor-

driven canoe they can be seen protecting their heads with *temiche* leaf segments, referred to as *aroko a kuasimara*, "leaf cape." But when the

Indians move about and need two free hands, they fashion a *temiche* cap which they call *yasi nona*, "an article worn for the sun."³ Since *temiche* palms grow closely scattered in tidal swamp forest or else in solid stands, called *temichales*, the Indian is never far away from this useful plant, and the manufacture of a sun shade, cape, or cap takes but a few moments of his time.

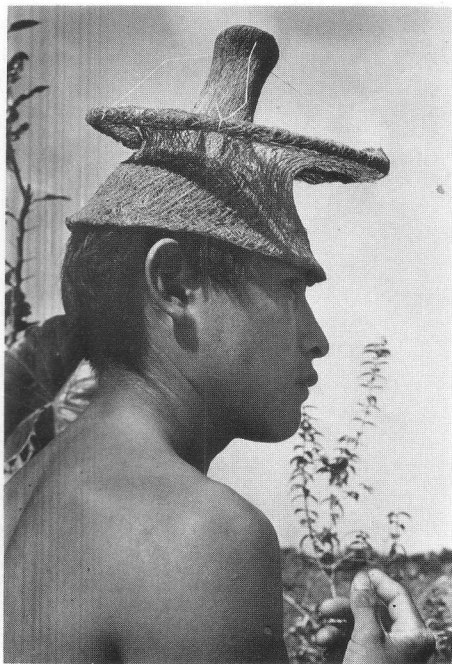
In addition to being ubiquitous in the tidal zone, *Manicaria saccifera* also seems to have no annual flowering period, so that the Indian can approach a palm almost anytime and with good chances of finding an untorn spadix in the flowering stage.

To produce a *temiche* cap, the Warao place the inflorescence on a firm support. If the cap is intended for an adult, he cuts the fibrous spathe with a sharp knife around the middle of the spadix. For a child the cut is made closer to the tapered lower end, where the circumference is narrower and more adequate for the smaller head size.

Upon completion of the circumcision the Indian slips off the severed half of the spathe, exposing thereby the flower bunch it used to sheathe.

Next the separated part of the spathe is turned inside out and the rim is folded up inwardly to the width of one inch. This strengthens the edge and gives the cap a finished look.

Growing among the leaves of the palm, flowering *temiche* spadices are usually moist and flexible. However, should the specimen selected for the cap dry out in the manufacturing process, the Indian will wet it before he slowly slides it over his head. To accomplish the latter he uses both hands, fingers spread, gently pushing



3. A Warao Indian of the younger generation in Venezuela wears a cap made from *Manicaria saccifera* but given a fancier shape than the usual model. Photograph by Peter T. Furst.

the hood downward while simultaneously stretching and pressing it against his head to give it the desired fit. In its finished form the *temiche* cap provides its bearer with effective protection against the sun. While wearing it, the Warao like to moisten the cap from time to time to make it more resistant and also to refresh themselves.

The Indian depicted in the manufacturing sequence of photographs is Antonio Lorenzano, a village headman of the Winikina subtribe. Besides being an astute political leader he is also a shaman. I have been studying with him since 1954 and respect his knowledge and ability to interpret Warao lore. Lorenzano has assured me that the *temiche* cap was a commonplace garment of the Warao before the recent introduction of West-

³ From *ya*, "sun," (*i*)*si(a)*, "for," and *nona*, "artifact."

ern hats of straw and felt. It was practical, cheap, and always in stock and style. In fact, the old Indian can become nostalgic over the *temiche* cap which is suggestive of a bygone *warao witu*, a "true Warao" way of life. Like the *bonnet phrygien*, a similar cap of the European historical past, the *temiche* cap has become emblematic to the old of Waraodom free of Western encumbrance.

I must admit though that the younger generation as I saw it grow up over the past 25 years, does find it awkward to wear *temiche* caps. The morning they arrive in a garden plot or rice field, for instance, men, women, and children may scramble to don their *temiche* bonnets. But once they see themselves all walk around in their new hoods, they find it hilarious, and the women start throwing theirs away. The younger men make their caps more acceptable to themselves by giving them all sorts of fancy shapes, some of which may even reflect long forgotten ritualistic content. Only in one particular instance is vanity cast aside by both men and women, i.e., when the Indians gather the honey of stingless bees (*Trigona* sp.). These tiny black monsters are in the bad habit of attacking the heads of their aggressors by biting their scalps and tearing their hair. Worse still, they crawl into their ears and eyes and noses and torture the honey seekers with scores of painful bites. To protect themselves from this airborne scourge,

everybody—men, women, and children—will make sure not to approach a hive of stingless bees without wearing a *temiche* cap, no matter how awkward it may make them feel otherwise. In any case, however, many of the men, especially those who lack Western hats and who will have to exert themselves in the blazing sunshine, keep their bonnets on their heads, grateful for the comfort, protection, and esprit they derive from wearing a *temiche* cap, even today.

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