



## Language and Culture Archives

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CHONTAL HATS

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by

Virginia Jones Russel

Summer Institute of Linguistics

The little Ghontal village of Tapotzingo with its seven hundred inhabitants is a thriving center of the sombrero industry in the State of Tabasco. The making of hats <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ the only work the men do other than to plant and harvest their corn crops twice a year.

There is a particuluar palm, which the Indians themselves call "shang", whose leaves are five feet long with a spread of four to five feet, each leaf weighing three to five pounds. These leaves are cut down with machetes (instruments useful for everything from felling trees to peeling sugar cane) and dried in the tropical sun. With deft fingers the men tear strips an eighth of an inch wide, double four of them and, tearing off one strand, weave with the remaining seven strands a perfectly even braid about five-eighths of an inch wide. When this braid is twenty-five double arms' breadths long (about forty meters), the <sup>inevitable</sup> ~~faithful~~ Singer sewing machine comes into play. So skillful are these ancient people with these modern inventions that they can sew the edges of this braid together in perfectly straight seams (in a circle, of course, to make both the crown and brim of the hat from one braid) while they whistle and look out the doors of their mud-floor, palm-thatched huts.

Tapotzingo is the center of the industry because here there are the cooperative, gas-fired machines which press the hats into shape and give them the smooth finished look that brings the desired price. Men are often seen carrying fifteen or twenty

hats on their heads stacked one on top of the other in a high tower, taking them to the machines for finishing touches. One man sewing steadily from daybreak to dusk is able to make twelve hats, though very seldom do the indians work so tirelessly. This industry is both ingenious and profitable, making out of a very poor people a thriving village.