

BASKETRY OF THE CHITIMACHA INDIANS

A Gift from Mrs. William Pepper.

ONE of the most interesting and least known tribes of American Indians is the Chitimacha, on the banks of the Grand River of St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana. At the present time there are only a few individuals, mostly halfbreeds, remaining. Of these only four know their language which is now seldom spoken.

The Chitimacha are first mentioned in connection with their murder of a missionary, St. Cosme, and three other Frenchmen in 1706. The French organized an expedition against them, and, with the aid of several allied tribes of natives, killed a large number and took many prisoners. These were taken to Mobile as slaves. In the long continued war that followed the Chitimacha, as a nation, were almost exterminated. Most of the Indian slaves were captive members of this tribe. Sixty years later the French and Spanish governors made peace with them and guaranteed them their territory.

A true caste system had developed among the Chitimacha. The chiefs and their descendants formed a distinct noble class, entitled to respect and obedience from the common people. The expressions used by the nobility in their intercourse with the common people differed greatly from those used by the latter. As in all caste systems, if a noble married an individual of a lower class he at once lost all claims to nobility and was obliged to live with the common people. For this reason, when there were no women of the upper class available, many of the nobles refused to marry, and thus hastened the extinction of the tribe.

The mortuary customs also are very interesting. Gatschet reports them as follows: "One year after the death of a head chief or any of the village war chiefs, of whom there were four or five, his bones were dug up by a certain class of ministrants called 'turkey buzzard men,' the remaining flesh was separated, the bones were wrapped in a new checkered mat and brought to the lodge. The inhumation of these bones took place just before the beginning of the Kut-nähä worshipping ceremony or dance. The people assembled and walked six times around a blazing fire, after which the bones

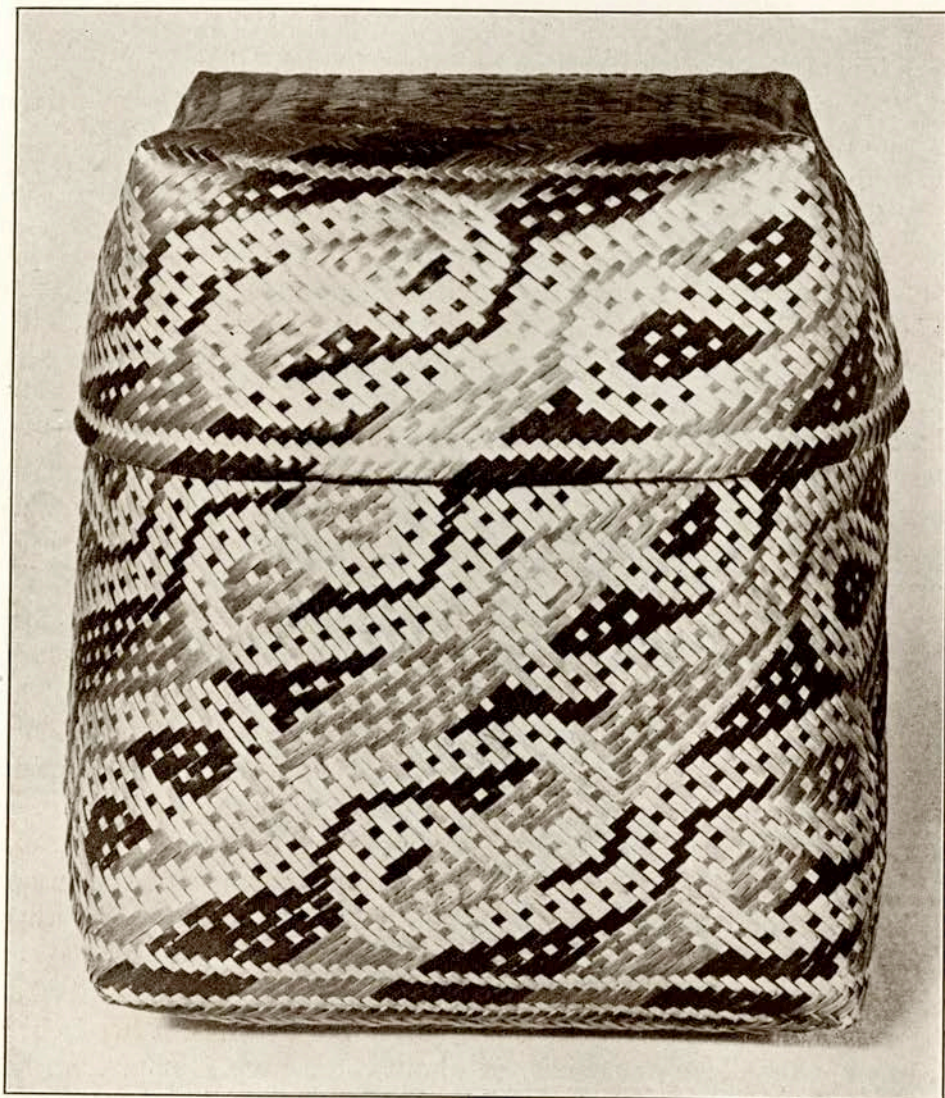


FIG. 11.—Chitimacha basket.
Alligator motif.

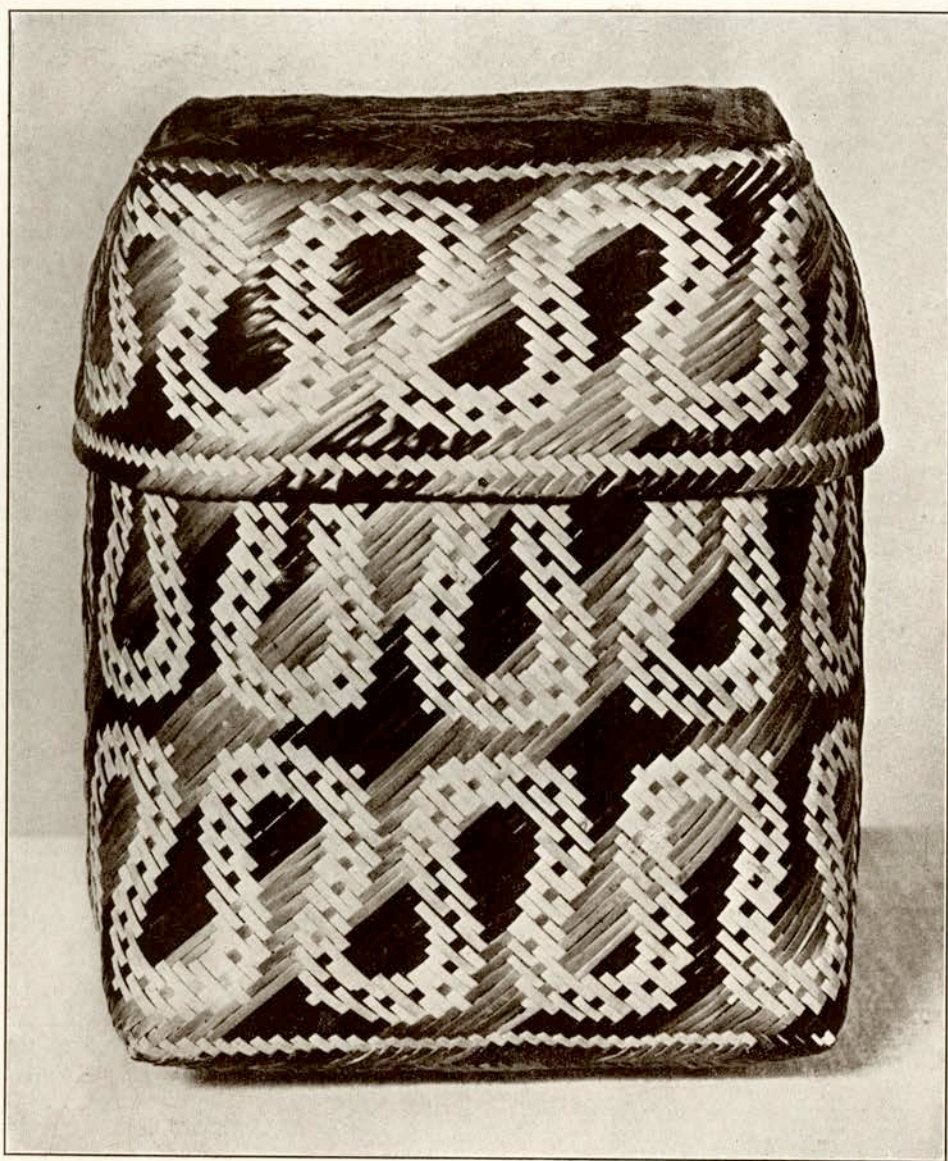


FIG. 12.—Chitimacha basket.
Worm track motif.



FIG. 13.—Chitimacha basket.
Cattles' eyes motif.



FIG. 14.—Chitimacha basket.
Blackbirds' eyes motif.

were placed in a mound. The widow and male orphans of the deceased chief had to take part in the ceremonial dance. The burial of the common people was effected in the same way, one year after death; but the inhumation of the bones took place at the village where they had died."

Dr. John R. Swanton adds that after the bones had been collected by the "buzzard pickers" they were burned and the ashes, placed in a little oblong covered basket of a type still manufactured, were given to the relatives of the deceased.

The manufacture of these baskets is perhaps the greatest cultural achievement of the tribe. To Mrs. Sidney Bradford of Avery Island belongs the credit for reviving this art and giving it a new impetus. At present basket making is the chief industry of the Chitimacha. Ample material for manufacture of baskets is furnished by the surrounding interminable canebrakes. The cane is split with the teeth, then dyed black, red or yellow and woven in two thicknesses so that both inside and out present the smooth glossy outer surface of the cane. The technique employed is known as the twilled pattern of weaving.

All of the baskets are oblong, varying in size from about an inch to more than a foot in height. All are made with a cover that fits closely over the lower part. Their mortuary use has been mentioned. They are principally used by the women and girls to keep their earrings, bracelets, garters, beads, ochre and other things that contribute to ornament their persons.

These baskets in their material weave and uses remind one strongly of the baskets of the Guiana Indians of South America.

Although the designs in the baskets from these two localities are derived from objects in nature they differ greatly. The Louisiana designs are much more conventionalized and are harder to trace to their source.

Mrs. William Pepper just before her death presented the University Museum with a collection of baskets. This gift included twelve excellent specimens from the Chitimacha. All of them are of natural cane, and are red and black in color. Four are selected here for illustration. Each design has its meaning as follows: alligator; interrupted worm tracks; eyes of cattle; blackbirds' eyes.

B. W. M.