The History of Ixtle in Mexico.—*Aechmea magdalenae* (Andre) Andre ex Baker, known as *ixtle* or *pita* in Mexico, is a perennial herb and terrestrial member of the Bromeliaceae. It has long spiny leaves that grow to 3.5 m in length and are found in dense, and sometimes monospecific clusters along streams, in swampy areas and on hillsides in lowland neotropical rainforests, from Mexico to Ecuador (1). The long white fiber extracted from its leaves is strong, durable, resistant to salt water, and has been employed throughout the neotropics in a wide range of uses (2). In Mexico, indigenous groups used *ixtle* to make rope, fishing nets, fishing lines, bags, fans, sandals, sewing thread and strings for musical instruments, especially the famous *jaranas* of Veracruz (3, 4). The Nahua of Veracruz utilized it to make their traditional *fajas* (sashes) as well as to make rustic clothes (4). In the 19th century, *ixtle* fiber was also used to manufacture paper (5). The *majagua*, or what remains of the leaf once the fiber has been removed, was braided in order to make hammocks and mats (4). The thorns of *ixtle* leaves were employed as needles and pins and the juice from the leaves was used as a caustic for wounds (5). *Ixtle* fruit, which has a taste similar to pineapple, was also consumed. In both Mexico and Guatemala, a variety with longitudinal stripes of red white and green (*Aechmea magdalenae var. quadricolor* M.B Foster) was cultivated as an ornamental (6). Depending on the region and on the indigenous group, *ixtle* fiber was either extracted by rasping the leaves with a sharp bone, by retting the leaves in water for a period of about 20 days, or by pounding the leaves with rocks (7,4).

In Mexico, the Chinantla region of Oaxaca was the seat of a flourishing *ixtle* cottage industry from precolonial times until the 20th century. Reports dating from the 1500s recount that the fiber produced in the Chinantla’s rainforests was valued and bought in cities as far away as Oaxaca and Veracruz (5). In fact Williams (5) makes reference to the existence of over 1000 “plantations” in 1831 in just one region of the southern Chinantla. Schultes (3) reviewed some of the early reports of *ixtle* in the literature and described the Chinantla’s vibrant *ixtle* industry in the 1930s, noting that most of the fiber produced was sold to Zapotec merchants. These merchants employed *ixtle* for stitching leatherwork and sold it in Zapotec centers and cities. In other parts of the Chinantla, the fiber was sold and used locally (4,8) and until the 1970s, the primary economic activity of many lowland Chinanteco was the production and elaboration of *ixtle* fishing nets. These were sold to upland communities where the fiber could not be produced.

History of Commercial Extraction. The importance of *ixtle* as a high quality, salt water-resistant fiber was not lost on the Europeans, who employed it to make the rope on the ships that crossed the Atlantic (7). During the colonial era and into the 19th century, ‘Colombian pita’ or ‘silk grass’ as it was known in Europe, was extracted in vast quantities from lowland tropical forests along the Caribbean coast of Latin America, especially from British Honduras and Colombia, and exported to Europe. In Mexico, the industry became so important that by the mid 1800s it was the most important export product of Veracruz (9). Although reports from both the Chinantla and from Veracruz indicate that cultivation had decreased the quantity of spines on the leaves (7, Feuell et al. (10) report that all the export production was extracted from wild populations.

The Europeans discovered *ixtle*’s potential as an industrial hard fiber in the early 1900s, after experiments showed the fiber to have exceptional breaking strain, tenacity and resistance to alkaline hydrolysis. It was thought it would be a premium fiber for fine twine and cordage as well as for textiles (11). During WWI it was reputed to be used in the construction of the wings of German aeroplanes (12). Because *ixtle* grew so abundantly in Latin America, in 1918 a syndicate of English companies put the trade name “Arghan” on the plant in an attempt to conceal its identity and market it as a new fiber plant that could only be produced in the English colonies. The syndicate was given large concessions of land by the governments of the Malay Peninsula and later of Ceylon (13,2), but plantations in both regions failed apparently because they could not produce fiber of the same quality as in Latin America (2). In any case, by 1923 American botanists had discovered that Arghan was actually *ixtle*, and with the failure of the plantations and the introduction of synthetic fibers by the mid 20th century, the demand for *ixtle* fell. In the early 1970s, local trade of *ixtle*