



WE ARE SEWING LIKE THE ANCESTORS - *CUMILLATSTUN MINQ 'RTUKUT*

ALUTIIQ GARMENTS

If you were an eighteenth century Alutiiq person, your wardrobe would contain a set of garments stitched from bird, fish and animal skins including sea otter, seal, caribou, and ground squirrel. For daily activities, you would wear a long, loose-fitting, hoodless robe and a soft undergarment stitched from the skin of a baby seal. Your outdoor clothing would include a waterproof rain jacket made of bear or sea mammal intestine, some socks woven from beach grass, a pair of knee length boots, and perhaps some bear skin mittens. And, if you were fortunate, you would own an elaborately decorated parka for special occasions.

All of these garments were expertly crafted. Women spent countless hours working by the light of fires and oil lamps to turn natural materials into warm, durable, beautifully decorated clothing. Alutiiq garments were more than attire. They were pieces of artwork that expressed the identity of their owner and talismans that demonstrated the close spiritual connections between people and animals.

PREPARING TO SEW

Accumulating materials was the first step in manufacturing clothing. Alutiiq garments often contained a variety of hides harvested over many hunts. After Russian contact, people were restricted to wearing garments made of materials with little value to the fur trade, particularly bird skins. The typical puffin parka – an every day garment – had about 60 skins, and a cormorant parka for special events had as many as 150 throat skins. Other garments combined the pelts of several animals. Alaska Peninsula Alutiiqs

wore parkas fashioned from squirrel, caribou, mink, otter, and ermine pelts.

Alutiiq people tanned mammal skins with urine collected in large wooden tubs stationed outside their houses. Alutiiq women soaked hides in these tubs relying on the ammonia in the urine to break down any remaining fat. Urine also removed hair from hides. Women soaked hides in urine and then rolled and left them in a warm place to sit for several days until the hair could be easily scraped away.

Bird skins, a popular material for parkas, were tanned with fish eggs. After scraping the skins to remove fat and tissue, Alutiiqs covered them with fish roe and left them to sit. After several days, they scraped the hides clean and kneaded them until they were soft and dry.

In addition to processing hides, seamstresses also made thread. First, they twisted sinew – bits of animal tendon – into strips with small wooden implements. Then, with their fingernails, they separated the strips into thin fibers, moistened them, rolled them between their palms, and wrapped the resulting thread around a wooden bobbin.



*Wooden spool
with ptarmigan
carving,
AD 1400-1750,
Koniag, Inc.
Collection,
Karluk One Site*



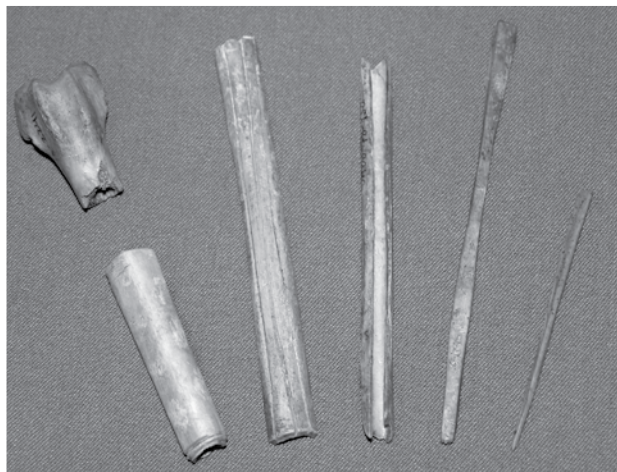
MINGQUN KAKIWIMNI.

THE NEEDLE IS IN MY SEWING BAG.

A SEAMSTRESS'S TOOLS

With a thimble made from a thick piece of hide, a sharply pointed bone awl and a slender needle, sewing began. First, a seamstress used her awl to pierce a hole in her hide. Then she used a slender bird bone or ivory needle to pull the thread through the hole. Some needles had tiny eyes. Others had a small knob for attaching the thread. Still others were unmodified. A sewer simply wrapped strands of sinew around these needles.

Seamstresses stored their tools in beautifully decorated bags or *kakiwik*. Men carried similar bags, with tools for repairing boats and clothing.



Artifacts from the Uyak site, Kodiak Island, illustrate how needles were made by cutting and polishing slivers of bird bone. Larsen Bay Tribal Council collection.

EMBELLISHMENTS

The final step in making any garment was decoration. Fur tassels, delicate embroidery and appliqués of dyed gutskin provided a spectacular finish, and often took as long to complete as the basic garment.

Decoration had both social and spiritual significance. Although the wealthy wore more richly decorated clothing to indicate their special status, clean, well-made clothing was essential to all as it showed respect for the animals that provided their skins. Clothes were also a form of amulet. Hunters wore the skins of the animals whose helping spirit guided them. Children were dressed in the skins of certain animals to bring them helpful qualities – quickness or good sight.

A HERITAGE OF SKIN SEWING

In classical Alutiiq society, sewing was both a social and educational activity. As they stitched, women enjoyed each other's company and taught young people to sew. Girls began to assist with simple sewing tasks at age six, making thread and braiding line.

Russian traders quickly recognized the skill of Alutiiq seamstresses and commissioned Native sewers to produce a variety of garments including European-style fashions made from traditional materials.

As Alutiiqs entered the Western economy, earning wages and purchasing goods, skin sewing waned. By the mid 19th century, imported fabric clothing began to replace skin garments. Fabric clothes were often worn indoors and traditional robes donned as coats.

Today, only a few self-taught artists practice the art of skin sewing. Hats, mittens and slippers are among the garments that they continue to craft from Kodiak's velvety sea otter, fox, and ermine pelts.