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Embellishments of the Alaska Native Gut Parka

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(1943 - 2008)

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Dealing with the various and extreme weather conditions in Alaska is a serious matter. Coastal Native Alaskans have been surviving in these severe environments for millennia. Without a local general store in which to buy a nice rain slicker, one must be resourceful with what is available. Between the hot summers and frigid winters are the transition seasons when it rains. Bird skins and fish skins were used extensively to make raincoats but it is the gut skin parka that proved so universal along the coast of Alaska (Fig. 1). From village to village different preparations, stitching methods and artistic styles are apparent and expressed in the embellishments that define the region, the culture and the function of these beautiful outer garments. For hundreds of years the indigenous people of the circumpolar region survived extreme conditions on their ingenuity and creativity. Using the animals, birds and fish of the region, they made garments of fur, skin, and intestine. It is quite understandable how fur would be used, even how fish skin and bird skin would be used as a waterproof garment. But it took some creative thinking to transform animal intestine from a food source to a garment. By comparison to any of the other garments used for weather protection, the gut parka (raincoat) was and still is the most effective against wet weather, and was once prized by the Russian occupants as overall the best protection against the elements. Gut parkas are constructed using the intestines of sea mammals or bear and are worn in kayaks, tide pool collecting, dance and celebration. Embellishment is achieved using hair, fur, leather, yarn, cloth, feathers and beaks – materials that are either resourced in each region or gathered through trade. Because of its practicality the gut parka continued to be made long after the sewing of bird skin garments, esophagus and sea lion flipper boots and hats for either ceremonial or utilitarian purposes.

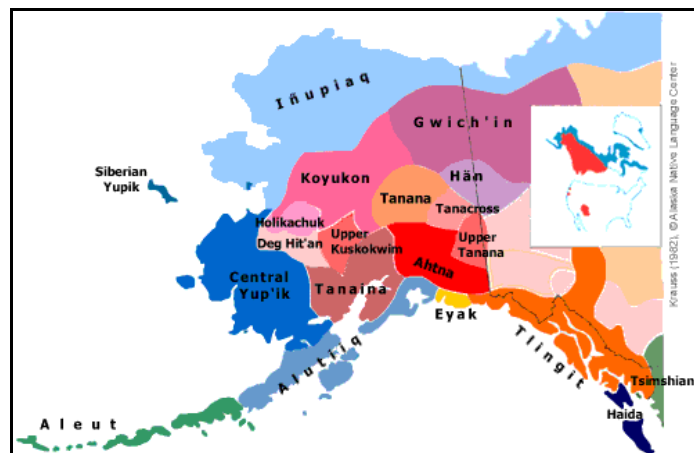


Figure 1. Alaska Native Regions Map. Image courtesy of Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska.

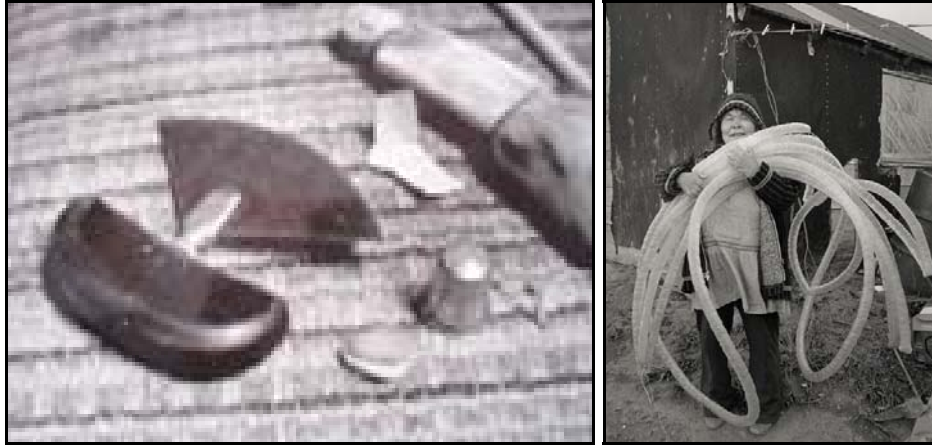


Figure 2 (left). *Ulu Scraper, Thimble, Alaska State Council on the Arts.*
Figure 3 (right). *Jim Barker, always getting ready, Alaska State Council on the Arts.*

In the western, non-Native tradition, gut was and still is used in making sausage. Casings are stuffed with a variety of foods to make the sausages, but can also be eaten alone like *chitlins*. To use gut as a fabric material, special preparations are needed. It must be thoroughly cleaned inside and out using scraping tool. The inside of the tube is cleaned by pulling it inside out. The *ulu* (the semi-lunar ‘woman’s knife’) is often the tool of choice for scraping (Fig. 2). Once cleaned the gut is then blown up, tied at the ends and stretched out straight (Fig. 3).

Blown gut requires only a short time to dry, but environmental conditions will alter dramatically the color and flexibility of the final product. The variations in temperature, darkness and wind, combined with duration of exposure to these conditions are the major factors that affect the gut fabric. Gut will become opaque and white when prepared in the most extreme conditions of cold, darkness and wind. This product is often referred to as ‘winter gut’, and by some by the inaccurate term ‘bleached’. The more yellow, non-flexible gut is prepared in less severe weather conditions and is called ‘summer gut’. The final step in preparing the gut is to cut it lengthwise to produce long ribbon-like materials that will be stitched together into a garment.

Garments of the Alaska native tradition are made using a variety of stitching techniques and with a variety of materials folded into the stitch. Sinew is used as a thread due to its strength and hygroscopic nature. The stitch technique can be either a running top stitch, an over stitch or a couching stitch. Often, additional strips of skin or cloth are sewn into the stitch to enhance its watertight quality. Materials sewn into the stitch for embellishment include grass, gut, sinew, feathers and caribou hair. Gut panels can be stitched from the inside or the outside of the garment and can be assembled with vertical panels or horizontal panels. All these variations can represent the person for whom it was made. Gut garments can be used for celebration and dancing, for shaman use in curing ailments, or for hunting and gathering in ocean kayaks or along the water’s edge. They can be constructed without any embellishments or with extremely elaborate embellishment detail.

From the far north to the south central region and all along the Alaskan coast parkas are made with distinctly different construction techniques and embellishments that spell the region from which they came. In all traditions the making of a gut garment is considered a gift to the animal whose flesh served to provide such a wonderful protection from the elements. Each parka is constructed with care and honor from the hunter and for the animals he has received and will gather for his family. It is important to the hunter that he looks his best while on the hunt, proudly and respectfully. During celebrations, it is equally important that the dancer be dressed properly. And it is of utmost importance that the shaman has just the right gut garment to perform his mystic curing.

Each region has distinctive expressions as seen in their gut garments. Beginning with the south central area in the Gulf of Alaska, Prince William Sound, Bristol Bay and Kodiak Island, home of the Alutiiq people, this rare parka (Figs. 4abcd, NMNH E011380) is made of summer gut and is a perfect example of the use of embellishments to shake off the water. The long strands and tufts of red and black wool yarn propel the water off the garment. It is in very poor condition but the dyed seal skin trim and beaded tassel at the end of the cuff strings indicate that it was an often-used garment for travel in the kayak. The hunter would tie his parka around the kayak hole and then tie the hood and cuffs tight in order for the parka to become completely waterproof even were the kayak should flip.



Figure 4a (left). Overall view. Koniag, Unknown date. **Figure 4b (right).** Hood detail. NMNH E011380.



Figure 4c (left). The garment is stitched with sinew using a couching stitch with caribou hair, NMNH E011380.

Figure 4d (right). Cuff with bead tassel and caribou hair stitching, NMNH E011380.



Figure 5a. Overall. NMNH E127671



Figure 5bcde (left to right). Details of NMNH E127671. 5b – hem. 5c – sleeve. 5d – shoulder. 5e – hood.

The parka above was collected in 1887 from Ft. Alexander in the Bristol Bay area (Figs. 5 a-e). Also made of summer seal gut it has a high collar and is stitched with tufts of yarn, esophagus, hair and feathers in the seams. It has dyed seal skin trim on the hood, cuffs and hem.



Figure 6a. Overall view of a kamlieka. Dated 1858. NMNH E 00894.



Figures 6b and 6c. View of a kamlieka. Dated 1858. NMNH E 00894. 6b (center). hood. 6c (right). neck.

During the Russian-American period (1741-1857) the capital was first located on Kodiak Island, later it was moved to Sitka. The Russians occupied the areas in order to harvest the otter and seal for trade with China. They dominated the Aleut and Alutiiq, demanding they hunt these animals for them. They saw the garments of gut as beautiful and practical and commissioned exquisite examples to be made for the officers. The traditional Aleut gut parka is a long garment with a high stand up collar. The body of the parka had fine yarns, hair, feathers and fabric stitched into the seams. This is a working gut parka collected in 1869. The Russians called these parkas ‘kamliekas’ and that word has been used as a general word for any gut parka. It is much more exact and appropriate to say kamlieka only when referring to a caped parka commissioned by the Russians. The kamlieka above, dated around 1858, is a beautiful example of this magnificent garment style (Fig. 6a - c).



Figure 7a (left). Overall. NMNH E002128. **Figure 7b (center).** Detail of cape. NMNH E002128.
Figure 7c (right). Close detail of cape. NMNH E002128.

During the mid to late 19th century native makers merged their material with European fashion, and emulated the caped over-coat style worn by naval officers. This garment, made of sea lion gut, has white seal skin with green and red esophagus glittered with galena. It has cormorant feathers in the trim along with eagle down and human hair in the seams. Hundreds of these cape kamliekas were made for the Russian officers (Figs. 7a – c). They were prized for their beauty and their waterproof qualities – so much so that the intense harvesting of the sea mammal factored in the demise of great numbers of Alutiiq and Aleut peoples.

Farther north above the Arctic Circle is the home of the Inupiat people. As much as they made many gut garments, their most commonly used garment was made of fur. This is a very unique gut garment from Golovin (Figs. 8a-b). It has a variety of construction techniques as well as materials that seem to come from many parts of Alaska. Collected in 1880 the garment has horizontal panels with auklet feathers, cormorant feather strips on the shoulders and hood, yarn tufts, dyed esophagus strips in the shoulder seams and top over-stitch using black sinew. Although the hood is similar to those from St Lawrence Island, the stitching is very much like the Aleuts and the sleeve construction is similar to Yupik or Inupiat.



Figure 8a (left). Overall. NMNH 043335. **Figure 8b (right).** Detail. NMNH 043335. Both, Nelson Golovin 1880.

Similarly, this rare gut garment was constructed using vertical seams and stitching (Figs. 9a – c), with crested auklet mandibles and tufts on seal throat along its entire length. Vertical stitching is a much more challenging parka construction method and it is fascinating to imagine seeing them when they first made their appearance.



Figure 9 (left). Overall. **Figure 9a (center) and Figure 9b (right).** Details. Vertical Auklet/Throat. NMAI 67485.

On St. Lawrence in the Chukchi Sea the gut parka is constructed in very subtle variations but the most common parka is the walrus or bearded seal winter gut parka made with auklet feathers and mandibles, dyed unborn seal shoulder seam with dyed seal skin tabs and trim. Stitched in horizontal bands using black sinew, this parka is considered a man's parka. Likewise, the vertical, inside stitched parka is most likely a woman's parka. It is embellished with tied tufts of dyed unborn seal fur on wool fabric. The classic pattern has large kimono-style sleeves, a halo like hood design and a wide body. These parkas can have a variety of embellishments which include dyed and undyed fur seal and seal skin and esophagus, auklet feathers, cormorant feathers and occasionally a mixture of gut to add to the overall design.

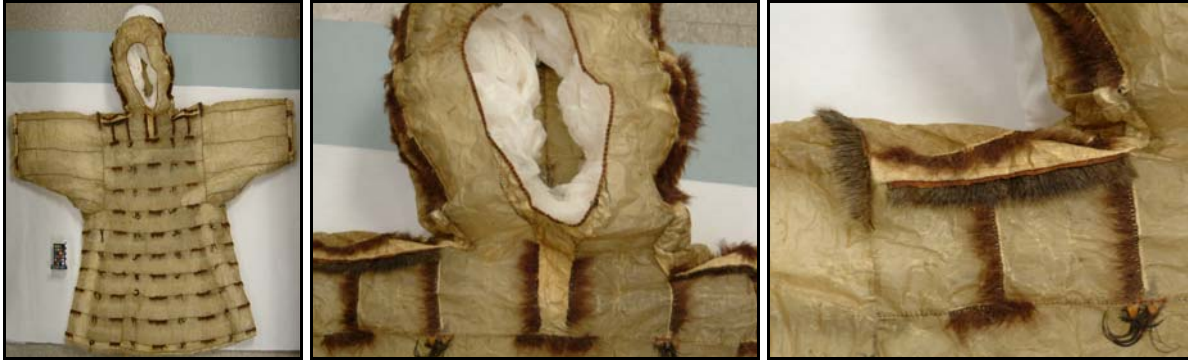


Figure 10a (left) Overall. 10b (center). Detail of hood. 10c (right). Detail of shoulder. NMNH 280185 1913.

This first of the two parkas shown (Figs. 10a-c: NMNH 280185) constructed in 1913 is made with summer and winter gut with 1/8" strips of dyed esophagus over each of the horizontal seams. Each horizontal panel is stitched separately as seen by the seam in each alternating row. This parka was made in 1923.

The second parka (Figs. 11a-e: NMNH 280186), constructed in 1913, is in a style very typical of the St. Lawrence parka. It has the vertical seams with crested auklet feathers and mandibles each with a small dyed seal skin tab. The shoulders are embellished with dyed baby seal and the hood with bird feathers. A vertically-stitched winter gut parka with tufts of beaver and mink with dyed baby seal and fabric. Dyed seal skin was used in the seams.



Figure 11a (top). Overall. Figures 11b – e (bottom, left to right). Details. NMNH 280186. 1913.

Still another variation, figure 12, found in the National Museum of Denmark, also can be found in numerous ethnographic museums.



Figure 12. Saint Lawrence Island. National Museum of Denmark.

The parka shown in figure 13, made in 1990, and on display at the Anchorage airport, has even more variations on the use of seal fur, this time using diagonal designs around the entire garment.



Figure 13 (left) and Figure 14 (right). Yup'ik parkas, collection of the Anchorage Museum.

Embellishment of these parkas used wolverine, bear, wolf, musk ox, dog hair, human hair, cormorant and murre feathers, eagle down, auklet feather and mandibles. They had baby seal and fur seal and seal skin, esophagus and seal throat stitched with sinew that was dyed or undyed using a variety of stitching methods including top running stitch, couching stitch with grass, caribou, or gut, the over seam stitch using sinew stitched with needles made from bird bones.

Details of Decorative Elements (Figs. 15a – d)



Figure 15a (left). Hooded Aleut Kamleika, det. National Museum of Finland, VK87, early 1800s. (Varjola 1990:149). **Figure 15b (center-right).** Detail of neck opening of ceremonial Aleut Kamleika. National Museum of Finland, VK 280, before 1846 (Varjola 1990:161). **Figure 15c (center-left) and Figure 17d (right).** Details of Aleut gut cape, National Museum of Finland, VK 4911:11 and gut cape CK 5463:3 (Varjola 1990:165).

Stitches and Sinew (Figs. 16a-b, Fig. 17)

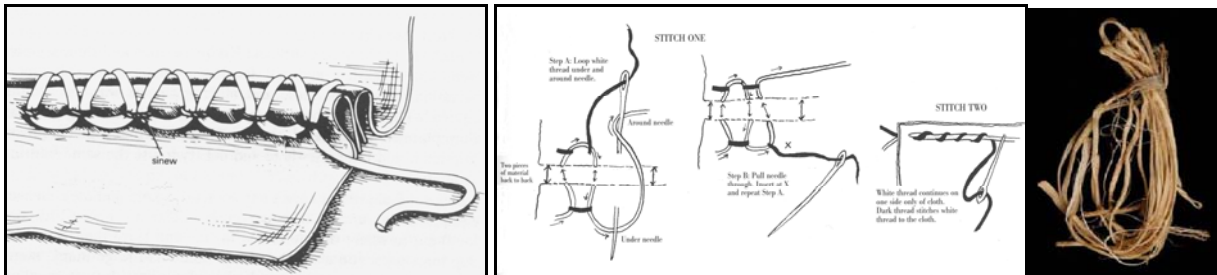


Figure 16a (left). Gut Raincoat stitch. *Secrets of Eskimo Sewing*. 1984.
Figure 16b (center). Aleut Stitches. Sophie Pletnikoff, *Cuttlefish* 2005.
Figure 17 (right). Sinew, Yup'ik Science Exhibit Catalog. 2008.

Gut Parkas Worn by Kayakers and Hunters (Figs. 18a-c)



Figure 18a, b, c. Aleut hunters and Kayaker with gut parkas. Jochelson collection, 1910.

The parkas discussed in this survey exemplify the wonderful and creative use of gut for waterproof wear. Gut was also used to make containers, dancing shawls, and house windows. Gut from bear and polar bear is very delicate and prized - often called 'made in Japan' for its rice paper fineness. Commonly, walrus, seal, sea lion and bearded seal were also used.

As the Russians learned in the 18th century, there was no better water proof garment than the gut parka. The garments and decorative elements of the Alaska native tradition are an expression of the connection with the animal world, either to please or appease, or to simply recognize the importance of the connection with all living beings.

Notes

1. Images with NMNH as part of the reference number are from the photo archives of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History.
2. Images with NMAI as part of the reference number are from the photo archives of the National Museum of the American Indian.

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