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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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“We Wear the Clothing of Our Ancestors”

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My tribe is a member of the Wabanaki Confederacy which consists of the Abenaki, Malecite, Mi’kmaq, and Passamaquoddy, Penobscot tribes of the United States and Canada. When I was a child, my tribe, the Elnu Abenaki Tribe was not State or Federally recognized in the United States, and many of our Elders were afraid to share our culture openly in public due to racial prejudice against us. My family taught me to keep our heritage secret from the dominant society. We could not afford to buy material for making regalia, so when I was young, I never had traditional clothing from my culture. As an adult, I began to research our traditional clothing in museum collections, in historical paintings, through seeking out Elders, and through experiential learning. I wanted to study Abenaki clothing to learn how and why styles changed which led me on a lifetime journey to rekindle our ancient textile knowledge. In the 1980s and 1990s, many Abenaki people were on a similar journey. This essay will explore what we have learned in the process of studying, making, and wearing our traditional garments.

In 2010 and 2011 four Abenaki tribes applied for and received recognition from the State of Vermont. The Elnu, Koasek, Missisquoi, and Nulhegan applications for tribal recognition contained previously unpublished oral history and family photographs. Inspired by this new information, the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association and Lake Champlain Maritime Museum developed a partnership to curate the traveling exhibit Alnobak: Wearing Our Heritage and put out a call for submissions of family photographs and traditional garments. The massive response from the community provided more than one hundred objects representing an Abenaki clothing timeline that spanned thousands of years. Most of the garments were made by living Abenaki artists. In addition to traditional clothing, the exhibit also featured a selection of old family photographs and some vintage pieces. Comments and questions from the public during gallery talks made explicit what was already suspected by the Abenaki community: most Americans had no idea what regional Native American garments look like. Visitors expected to see animal hides were often surprised by the variety of textiles.

The exhibit sheds light on how Abenakis continued to hold onto their indigenous identities. Long after colonization, Abenaki continued making and wearing “traditional regalia.” Two outfits in the exhibition stand out as the subject of a great deal of discourse between museum visitors and the exhibition curators. As visitors walked into the gallery, they encountered an Archaic Style Twined Dress that was handwoven by the author. My father started teaching me our family’s weaving and sewing traditions when I was only six years old. In addition to completing a traditional weaving apprenticeship with my father, I have been juried as a Master artist in the areas of plant fiber weaving, and regalia making. The second garment that drew extraordinary

1 The title is written in Abenaki (Native American) and English.
2 Alnobak is the Abenaki work for people.
attention in the exhibition is the *Prayer Coat* made by Denise Pouliot of the Cowasuck Band of the Pennacook Abenaki in New Hampshire. Since the early 1990s, Pouliot and I have designed and made hundreds of pieces of traditional regional regalia that have been worn by people in our communities to affirm their heritage and connection to their communities.

The outfits we exhibited in *Wearing Our Heritage* were designed using traditional techniques and knowledge obtained from studying images and historical documentation, and knowledge gained from culture bearers. Since textiles are a perishable technology, there are not many actual samples to study or living culture bearers who knew the entire process for making these garments. In both cases, the artists did a combination of research and experiential learning to rekindle these textile traditions.

My family continues to practice an ancient textile weaving technique that we refer to as knotting. Although we continue to use this technique to create bags and containers, no living family members know the patterns for creating pre-contact Abenaki plant fiber clothing, or know what they might have looked like. However, research uncovered archeological evidence and historical accounts to support my family traditions and the idea that aboriginal people in our region made sophisticated textiles. An ancient burial ground in Vermont, known as the Boucher site, had yielded many examples of twined plant fiber textiles when Abenaki ancestors were exhumed by archeologists. After being studied, the ancestors and their textiles were reinterred. Photographs and written analysis by the original team remained available to study. I feel conflicted about how the data was obtained. However, I learned a great deal about an art form that has been in my family for untold generations. I also examined surviving pieces in museums and private collections, and read documentation from later eras.

In the early 1990s, when I read *The Original Vermonters: Native Inhabitants, Past and Present* by William A. Haviland and Marjory W. Powers I realized how our family weaving tradition was connected to the archeology in our homeland. By 2007, I had gained confidence in my ability to weave and began designing a garment that would be encoded with information from family traditions that reach back through several millennia. Using what I already knew about knotting or twined weaving, what I read in historic accounts, what I learned studying historic pieces and the ergonomics of general clothing design I began to design my dress and a matching bag. The *Archaic Style Dress* (Illustration One) was constructed in a single piece, with tubular construction that is similar to making a beginner-style flat bag by having the warp threads hanging down. There are no seams on the dress because it is constructed utilizing continuous double wefts that have circled the dress over seventy times.

Knowing that cordage found at the Boucher site ranged from .3 mm to 3.5 mm, I designed the *Archaic Style Dress* utilizing a mid-range of 1.5 mm to 2 mm plant fiber cordage and made it in my size so I would be able actually to wear the garment. The dress construction utilized the same weaving styles as the textile samples at the Boucher site. Most of the textile alternates between a closed twined weave and a diagonal weave, but it also includes a plaited section. The

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weaves alternate from one area to another based on the amount of mobility a particular part of the dress needs. For instance, the top of the dress is woven with a tight closed weave, so the fabric is strong enough to attach the shoulder straps. Whereas, the mid-section of the dress was created utilizing a diagonal weave for maximum flexibility in the textile so the wearer can bend at the waist.

The design on the top of the dress was achieved using a plaited embroidery process where the warps are wrapped with dyed plant fibers but could just have easily have been wrapped in moose hair like the textiles found at the Boucher site. Construction of the dress has been slow because it takes one and a half to two hours to weave around the dress one time and even slower when plaiting a geometric design. In addition to wearing the dress, I also hope to educate the public about the intricacy of historic Abenaki weaving which I feel is on par with that of Mayan textiles. Comparison of Abenaki textiles to Mayan textiles it is an area of interest that I hope to pursue in future research.


The top of the dress and its accompanying bag are wrapped in the design “where the mountains meet the sky.” When I was young, my father told me that this geometric design had been handed down in our family for many generations. Although the dress is still not complete, the matching back is finished. The bottom portion of the bag has two parallel lines that represent the Connecticut River valley in my tribe’s territory, and within the design, there are hidden double curves that represent our agricultural systems and the continuity of our existence over many millennia. Double curves will later be revisited in the discussion of Denise Pouliot’s Prayer Coat.
Through the experience of making plant fiber clothing, I have gained some valuable insights into the textile making processes of my ancestors. I believe that the techniques my ancestors used were likely well planned as the result of one generation teaching the next. Each garment would have taken a great deal of time and resources to make because it would have required harvesting and processing thousands of milkweed plants, making hundreds of yards of cordage, and likely hundreds of hours of weaving. Plant fiber clothing offers advantages over leather because woven natural fiber textile breathes and wicks moisture away from the skin which can be beneficial in a cold climate.

The second object in the exhibit that drew a great deal of attention was an outfit that artist Denise Pouliot refers to as a Prayer Coat, paired with a wrap skirt and leggings. The wrap skirt and leggings in this ensemble resemble garments depicted in Eighteenth century sources: a watercolor painting of an Abenaki Man and Woman in the Montreal Archives and a watercolor painting of a Huron Man and Abenaki woman in the collection of the Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum, FRG in Germany. A similar skirt was described in the memoir of Pierre Pouchot, a French army officer, who describes Native American women in Canada as wearing a “…petticoat [wrap skirt] called machicoie made of an ell of blue or red cloth ... The lower edge is ornamented with several strips of yellow, blue and red ribbon or English edging lace.” Denise Pouliot’s wrap skirt and leggings are indeed made from blue wool, but instead of ornamenting her skirt with rows of ribbons she chose to decorate her outfit with red ribbon and chain stitched embroidery to honor her ancestors who had converted to Catholicism and learned French skills.

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5 Unknown. Abenaki Man and Woman. 18th-century watercolor. Montreal Archives, Quebec, Canada.

6 Unknown. Huron and Abenaki of Canada. 18th-century watercolor. Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum, FRG in Germany.

7 Pierre Pouchot, In Memoir upon the late war in North America, between the French and English, 1755-60; followed by observations upon the theatre of actual war, and by new details concerning the manners and customs of the Indians; with topographical maps, Volume 2, Trans. Franklin B Hough, (Roxbury, Mass: W. Elliot Woodward, 1866), 187 -189.

"Prayer Coat" by Denise Pouliot on display in the traveling exhibition "Alnobak: Wearing Our Heritage" at the Amy Tarrant Gallery, Flynn Performing Arts Center, Burlington, VT. April 8, 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist.
As early as the seventeenth century Ursuline nuns came to New France and established schools where they could teach young Huron, Montagnais, Algonquian, and Abenaki women to become “good” Christian women. Young Native women likely learned the chain stitch embroidery quickly because it bears a strong resemblance to Native American quillwork techniques with which young indigenous women would already have been familiar.

Historically the Abenaki would have received military style and gentleman’s style wool coats from our French allies and then decorated them with important images that represented their cultural identity, protective spiritual properties or other important messages. Pouliot decided to top off her skirt and leggings with what she calls a Prayer Coat instead of a matchcoat like those which Abenakis wear in historic paintings. Pouliot named her garment a Prayer Coat because she believes that her ancestors would have been “praying for safe passage when they wore these coats and approached other villages.” The imagery that was beaded or stitched on to the coat would have been recognizable from a distance and could function as a passport or identification card to gain access to certain villages and territories.

As a teenager in the 1990s, Pouliot did not have much time or money to travel for research, and online research did not yet exist. Nor were there any known historical examples of this style of coat within the Western Abenaki homelands. In his publication Traditional Abenaki Clothing 1800 to 1900, Frederick M. Wiseman, Ph.D. suggests that these coats would have been passed on from generation to generation in families until nothing was left of the fabric. Therefore there were no accessible examples for Pouliot to study. So, she focused her studies on images she found at the library. Rather than patterning her coat after a military or gentleman’s coat Pouliot modeled it after images of the cassocks worn by Black Robes or the Jesuit priests’ cassock they wore when they administered the Catholic sacraments to converted Native American followers.

Study of the garments and images of Pouliot wearing it, reveal that the rear view of the coat appears to have fullness similar to the priests’ cassock and a “Chief’s Coat,” but Pouliot’s coat comes below the knee. Therefore, it is shorter than a historic cassock. The lapels on Pouliot’s coat

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10 Denise Pouliot, Discussion with author.


12 Denise Pouliot. Discussion with author.

13 Abenakis and other Algonquian speaking people referred to Jesuit priests as Black Robes because their vestments were black.

14 A cassock is part of the vestments of a Jesuit priest

15 Denise Pouliot. Discussion with author.
clearly bear no resemblance to the front of a Jesuit cassock. Instead, they resemble the lapels in a historical photograph of Chief Sol Neptune taken in 1875; this image is featured Frank Speck’s, *Penobscot Man.* 16 The Neptune and Pouliot lapels appear to have a similar triangular shape with a slight ruffle. However, Pouliot’s lapel is significantly shorter than that of Chief Neptune. Also, the collar construction on Pouliot’s coat is much rounder than the one that Chief Neptune wears.

Both coats bear double curve embellishment designs that are similar to a 1850s Mi’kmaq coat in the collection of Victoria Museum in Australia.17 The Mi’kmaq coat bears a general resemblance to Pouliot’s *Prayer Coat* in that both are long wool coats. However, there are several structural differences between them. Pouliot’s coat has a fuller skirt, and the lapel on the Mi’kmaq coat more closely resembles the lapel on a contemporary men’s suit. The rear yokes are also cut differently. Pouliot’s coat is embroidered with chain stitch while the Mi’kmaq and Penobscot coats are ornamented with tiny glass seed beads which the Abenaki, Mi’kmaq, and Penobscot people acquired through trade with the French.

Something all three coats share in common is the use of double curve designs. Double curves regularly appear on objects made by Wabanaki people because the double curve motif is significant to all Wabanaki tribes. These designs are remnants of the Wabanaki written language. At one time, there were many of these designs, and they had specific meanings. However the meanings of some of these designs may have been lost over time.18 Nevertheless, the edges of Pouliot’s ensemble are entrenched with personal and cultural symbolism. It took Pouliot six months of handwork to customize her regalia. Each design element was chosen for a specific reason and conveys an important message right down to her birth order in her family and includes the spiritual protection of the tobacco leaves, pine trees, and double curves.20

In “The Material Culture of the Huron,” the anthropologist Frank G. Speck wrote about the Huron “Chief’s coat” which is the historical name that was assigned to this type of coat by non-Native people.21 Much later, Speck describes it further in book *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe,* where he shows an image of a Chief wearing this coat.22 However, in the indigenous community of New England, there are still people who recall that this style of coat was not strictly worn by Chiefs. During an oral history interview, Pouliot reminisces that when she first started wearing the coat in the 1990s, Elders told her that they remembered this style of coat and they were happy to see her bringing back this tradition. However, Pouliot’s coat also


17 The Mi’kmaq people are from the same political alliance and a closely related kinship group to the Abenaki.


20 Denise Pouliot. Discussion with author


drew criticism from people who had read Frank Speck’s *Penobscot Man* and believed that this style is only to be worn by a Chief.\(^{23}\) In the book, Chiefs are wearing this style of coat in photographs because the taking of a photograph was a special occasion and they dressed up for the portrait.

It may seem as if Wabanaki fashion has changed drastically over many millennia, but perhaps it has not changed as drastically as was previously envisioned. What if it is only our awareness of the materials that has changed? My experience as an artist, researcher, and now curator has changed how I look at our textiles. I used to think that clothing styles changed and evolved from animal skins to textiles, however, now as I reexamine historic images and written documentation with new eyes as a curator, I am revisiting the possibility that plant fiber textile clothing could have co-existed with leather and fur garments. Samuel de Champlain’s journals from the early 1600s indicate that he encountered Native people wearing plant fiber and grass garments as well as furs and leather within the larger region.\(^{24}\) Textiles produced by laborious pre-contact methods would have been quickly replaced by cloth acquired by trade, and furs were of much greater interest to the European trading partners who recorded their impressions of the indigenous people they encountered. It is time to reexamine the evidence that suggests that the Abenaki legacy of textile skills is deeply rooted in the use of local plant fibers, and did not begin, but rather found new expression with the arrival of new tools and materials.

The garments that are made by Denise Pouliot, myself, and others are important because they were not made to be exhibited but rather as personal participation in the living tradition of *Wearing Our Heritage* that we share with many generations of our ancestors. The clothing that we are creating today can be studied to understand the textile traditions of our ancestors better. Through taking the time and making the commitment to make and wear these textiles some Abenaki people feel a stronger connection to their ancestors with whom they share a common experience. Through making and designing garments, we are continuing the traditions of our ancestors and using our almost forgotten skills, symbols, and even vestiges of written language that still appear in our art, on our wampum belts, and our clothing. Abenaki people today are better able to uncover evidence of the past through online searches, and we are taking steps to preserve the voices and memories of our Elders and Master artists through oral history, videography, and digital archiving. Even garments that are retired from usage are being preserved and made available through exhibitions, workshops, and publications to inform one another and to educate others about Abenaki culture.

Abenaki people continue to create clothing and regalia to pay homage to their ancestors and show a connection to their kinship group. Both the symbols on my dress and Pouliot’s outfit were chosen carefully to carry significant encoded messages about the artist, her family, and her people. Each stitch is a prayer for future generations. Additionally, these garments carry essential information about Abenaki clothing that is missing from the historical record because the surviving twined woven garments have been reinterred and there are no known examples of

\(^{23}\) Denise Pouliot. Discussion with author.

\(^{24}\) Samuel de Champlain, *The Voyages and Explorations of Samuel de Champlain: with Historical Illustrations and a Memoir*, vols. 1: 1567-1635 (Boston: A.S. Barnes & Comp., 1880), 188.
coats from the historic period. Now we have a more detailed account of what garments may have been like when our Abenaki ancestors made their clothing hundreds or even thousands of years ago. In recent years, these two garments, which embody the connection of living textile artists to their indigenous ancestors, have also become sources of inspiration to the wider Abenaki community. Young people have asked to apprentice with me to learn the technique of twining to create garments and accessories. Likewise, both women and men have begun to design and create coats that echo Pouliot’s Prayer Coat. The slender threads of textile traditions link us to our ancestors and forge stronger connections between our peers and future generations.

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