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Alnôbakskwak: Native American Women Making Ceremonial Regalia

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As an artist, activist, and scholar who is an active participant in the Abenaki community, I will share a story that might otherwise be hidden. It will likely not be published in history books. It's the story of how a group of Abenaki women created a set of clothing for the cultural revitalization of traditional Abenaki agricultural ceremonies. Before discussing the regalia making project, you need to know more about the tribe to appreciate why cultural revival is necessary.

The Western Abenaki tribe comprises many communities on the northeast borderlands between the United States and Canada. As a borderland people, we have survived over 400 years of colonial encroachment, many wars with colonial settlers, Abenaki towns and fields being burned, lands being stolen and redistributed to colonial settlers and massive losses of community members due to disease, slaughter, and starvation. Later, in the twentieth century, the community was threatened by the Vermont Eugenics survey. The dominant culture forced sterilization upon Abenakis because they thought we were undesirable. As a result, many Abenaki families feared recriminations if they self-identified as Abenaki to the dominant white culture.

But this is the story of a strong and resilient Native American community that started reinvigorating older traditions in the late 20th century. Strong female leadership has always led our families through historical turmoil, and today women continue to guide us on our path to cultural revitalization and strengthening our communities. Recently, in 2011 and 2012, the State of Vermont officially recognized the Elnu, Nulhegan, Koasek, and Missisquoi Abenaki tribes, clearing the way for the founding of the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association, and for public expression of enduring Abenaki culture through exhibitions, education programs, and traditional arts.

N'Dakinna (our homeland) is so vast that Abenaki family and friends cannot gather in person very often, so we formed an Abenaki Women's Group (AWG). This group filled a need for us to socialize, transmit culture, and support each other. Monthly meetings were difficult, so we also started a private group on Facebook. The AWG has ongoing discussions about finding projects that we could all work on, and eventually, a project presented itself.

In late 2017, a core group of Abenaki community members worked together to plan the 2018 Fall Harvest Supper. This public event would showcase Abenaki foods, music, and a rehearsal of harvest dances, which Frederick Wiseman, an Abenaki historian, was teaching to a group of Abenaki community members.¹² Making regalia for the agricultural dancers was a perfect project for the AWG because generosity and creativity are traits shared by strong Native American

¹ ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain. 2018. Website. "The Abenaki Harvest Celebration, October 14." <https://www.echovermont.org/event/the-abenaki-harvest-celebration> Accessed May 1, 2021.

² Frederick M. Wiseman. 2019. "Chasing Seeds: The Story of Vermont's Forgotten Abenaki Food System." *Vermont Magazine*, 72-77. Accessed May 20, 2019.
https://vermonthistory.org/documents/VermontMagazine/31_1_MarchApril2019Seeds.pdf.

women leaders. It was suggested that we make regalia for dancers in each of the four recognized tribes. There wasn't enough time to complete a project of that magnitude because each dance requires a specific configuration of dancers, drummers, and rattlers. For instance, one dance has a Sun and Moon dancer, male and female, circling together, looking deeply into one another's eyes. In the Green Corn song, young dancers approach the Corn Elder Woman hoping that she will choose their corn seeds for planting next year's cornfields. The Storm Dancers travel together like a rainstorm and bump their dancing sticks on the floors like strikes of thunder.

Culturally, we need to be as inclusive as possible, so people participated in different ways. An intergenerational committee was formed with people ranging from their 20s through 60s. Traditions are essential, so we decided to work within a consensus-based framework. Some members would help to develop the patterns, and others would create the clothing.

As the design work began, Abenaki historian Melody Walker and I introduced the group to paintings, illustrations, and examples of our traditional clothing styles. Some of the materials our group agreed on were red and blue wools or stroud cloth as described in period writings like Pierre Pouchot's memoirs.³ The hoods we created were inspired by a watercolor image of "A Huron and Abenaki of Canada, late 18th-century" by an unknown artist⁴ and an image of Molly Molasses (1775-1867) wearing her peaked cap, which is known in the Penobscot⁵ language as *gwɔnuskwa'kwsɔ̃_k* which means "long pointed" in her Native tongue.⁶

Our design group discussed the concepts of what is traditional and "what is traditional for a given time period?" We decided to make garments and regalia that would connect people of the present day to earlier traditions. An important choice we made was to use techniques from the pre-contact and early contact periods. However, we recognized that we are modern people who should not be limited with strict parameters from the past, so each artist could bring their own experience of our history and traditions to their pieces.

Since different dancers might participate from event to event, we decided to create something that would be adaptable to people of different sizes and shapes. The older design of a traditional peaked hood and a collar like the examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth century were chosen because they met both criteria: they are styles worn by our ancestors and are "one size fits most" type of garments.

Based on input and feedback from the entire design group, I created a hood and collar pattern and distributed the pre-cut hood and collar blanks to our regalia makers' team. Although we worked from the same pattern, each regalia maker was free to complete and embellish the hoods and collars as they envisioned them. A harmonious effect could be achieved by asking dancers to

³ Pierre Pouchot. *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.*

⁴ "A Huron and Abenaki of Canada, late 18th-century" by an unknown artist appears in Ruth Phillips' essay 'Like a Star, I Shine. Northern Woodlands Artistic Traditions' in *The Spirit Sings. Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples.* McClelland and Stewart and Glenbow Museum (1987), 51-92.

⁵ The Penobscot tribe is also known as the Eastern Abenaki.

⁶ Molly Molasses wearing her peaked cap. Abbe Museum. 2017. <http://archive.abbemuseum.org>

wear a white shirt and dark-colored skirt or pants. The following section will take a closer look at some of the garments made by the AWG.

The Regalia

Sherry Gould of New Hampshire used the group's pattern and added a white silk-wrapped ribbon edging. She also added a diamond shape of white needle-felting (see figure 1).⁷ She embellished the hood with a light blue beadwork star. When looking at the design, a knowledgeable Wabanaki textile maker or scholar would recognize this as a star woven on a twined belt made by Rachel Maloon (circa 1763), now in the collection of New Hampshire Historical Society. See Figure 2.

*Figure 1 – Hood by Sherry Gould. Image courtesy of Vermont Abenaki Artists Association.
Courtesy of Vermont Abenaki Artists Association.*

During the French and Indian War, Rachel was a captive adopted by an Abenaki family that raised her as their daughter for seven or eight years. She didn't want to leave but eventually went back to living with the English. After returning to her settler family, she made a quilled porcupine belt for Peter Kimball (1739 - 1811 of Boscawen, NH. When comparing the pieces by

⁷ Sherry Gould is a citizen of the Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe.

Gould and Maloon, the continuity of design tradition is apparent although different techniques are used.

Figure 2 - Detail of celestial design on Rachel Maloon's twined plant fiber and porcupine quilled belt in the New Hampshire Historical Society Collection. Image courtesy of Vermont Abenaki Artists Association.

The peaked hood made by Denise Pouliot of New Hampshire reflects another aspect of Abenaki needlework heritage. She used the same hood pattern blank and a red ribbon to wrap the edges in the traditional style, but instead of beadwork, she created design elements using a chain stitch in white thread. Abenaki women learned the chain stitch from Ursuline Nuns. At their Mission in Canada, established in 1639, the Ursuline nuns taught young Native American women skills that these French nuns believed to be essential for young women of marriageable age to know.^{8 9 10} In return, the Native women taught the nuns techniques of Indigenous quillwork, which bears a resemblance to thread embroidery. However, the embroidery technique requires flattened and dyed porcupine quills that the nuns were not familiar with.

Jeanne Morningstar Kent of Connecticut made the hood in Figure 3. The artist's comments serve to illustrate the many layers of meaning that this project encompasses for today's Abenaki community. Jeanne incorporated flat ribbon and beadwork into her hood. Figure 3 shows the detail of white beadwork. Jeanne, a retired educator, worked despite great pain in her hands as she beaded this double curve design. Double curves are a significant design in Abenaki culture. There are many different variations of double curve symbols that carry different meanings, such as your place in a family or as a preserver of tradition.^{11 12 13} Unfortunately, the specific meaning of many of these designs is almost gone.

⁸ Vera Longtoe Sheehan, "Nd'awakananawal Babijigwezijik Wd'elasawawôganôl: 'We Wear the Clothing of Our Ancestors.'" *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* (2018). DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

⁹ Marie de l'Incarnation, *Words from New France. The Selected Letters of Marie de L'Incarnation*. Translated and Edited by Joyce Marshall. (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 73, 77, 335.

¹⁰ Katherine E. Lawn, Claudio R. Salvucci, *Women in New France: Extracts from the Jesuit Relations, Vol. 5 of Annals of Colonial North America*, (Evolution Pub & Manufacturing, 2003).

¹¹ Sheehan, "Nd'awakananawal Babijigwezijik Wd'elasawawôganôl," 6, 9.

¹² Vera Longtoe Sheehan, "The Double Curve Motif," *Voice of the Turtle* (Tolba Clan of Southern Vermont, 1998), Elnu Abenaki Tribe.

¹³ Frank G. Speck, "The Double-Curve Motive in Northeastern Algonkian Art," *Canada Geological Survey, Memoir* 42, No. 1 Anthropological Series. (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1914).

*Figure 3 - Beaded peaked hood embellished by Jeanne Morningstar Kent.
Courtesy of Vermont Abenaki Artists Association.*

On Jeanne and Bob's wedding day in 1998, she wore 18th-century style regalia with her hood. As an Elder in the community, Jeanne describes what it is like to wear regalia. She says, "It is as if we are wearing the spirit of our ancestors."¹⁴ She believes very strongly that we should only wear regalia for occasions within our Abenaki community and not to outside public events.

In addition to peaked hoods, the AWG created collars that the dancers would wear over white shirts. The collars were inspired by a modern example worn by Grandmother Alma Brooks of the St. Mary's First Nation in New Brunswick and historical examples in museum collections. The beaded collar in Figure 4 was the first piece of regalia to be completed by the regalia making committee. Susan Havens donated it. She had heard the discussion about making the regalia and wanted to be a part of the project. Susan initially was making this collar for herself but generously donated it to the community. Her beadwork illustrates the summer's bounty with bright and colorful leaves and flowers, and it became the collar to be worn by the Corn Elder.

¹⁴ In private conversation with the artist.

*Figure 4 – Beaded collar by Susan Havers.
Courtesy of Vermont Abenaki Artists Association.*

By contrast, the collars that were made for the Thunder dancers (Figure 5) were much more straightforward. They are adorned with seven abalone shells representing the celestial constellation known in western culture as the Pleiades, which is bright in the summer sky. The location of Pleiades, lunar cycle and other environmental factors help Abenaki planters like John Sheehan of the Elnu Tribe, know when the time is right to plant and harvest.^{15 16}

*Figure 5 - Storm Dancer collar with Pleiades design made by Vera Longtoe Sheehan.
Courtesy of Vermont Abenaki Artists Association.*

¹⁵ John is an Elnu Abenaki Elder ethno-science knowledge keeper. A small part of his agricultural knowledge was documented in the *Elnu Abenaki Tribe Application for Vermont Recognition Application: Under: Sec. 1. 1 V.S.A. § 853 (c) Recognition Criteria* in 2010.

¹⁶ Frederick Wiseman, *Seven Sisters: Ancient Seeds and Food Systems of the Wabanaki People and the Chesapeake Bay Region* (Thomasberg: Earth Haven Learning Centre Publishing, 2018).

Sensitivity to spiritual connections with the world around us is central to many Abenaki people, which is one reason why our group decided that this regalia would not be brought to life in ceremony while we were making it. The Nulhegan Tribe would bring it to life after they received the hoods and collars. The decision to bring the regalia to life later afforded us the opportunity for photographic documentation of the hoods and collars for historic preservation purposes, which is why I can share the photographs that accompany this article.

It is essential to understand the cultural distinction between this regalia and costumes. You may wear costumes to a party, a play, or when children go Trick or Treating on Halloween. The regalia made during this project is not merely a costume worn while dancing for entertainment. These garments are similar to the vestments a Priest or a Rabbi might wear during religious services, made only to be worn during the ceremony and not as ordinary dress clothing or streetwear. It would be difficult to say more without violating cultural privacy.

Final Thoughts

This essay is a reflection of being embedded in the Abenaki community, written with permission from the community and within a cultural context. New paradigm shifts are happening in academia. Shawn Wilson states, “research isn’t just *like* a ceremony, it *is* a ceremony.”¹⁷ In the past, scholars wrote volumes of books and articles about Indigenous communities of which they had little knowledge. They sometimes misunderstood the subject of their research because they didn’t understand the cultural context of the subject matter. However, scholarship is changing. It is always best practice to work with the community being studied, and to follow the community’s cues about what is important, which was attempted here. It is also crucial to note that the cultural information contained here belongs to the community. As is the practice with Abenaki scholars, this article will be gifted to the Nulhegan Historic Preservation Office, where it can remain together with the donated regalia.

The regalia made for the October 2018 Harvest Ceremony of the Vermont Abenaki embodies more than textile art skills. It exemplifies the enduring cultural legacy of a multigenerational community that engages older customs, designs, and regalia as central practices in their ongoing cultural revitalization. It also illustrates our cultural values of generosity and respect for women. Twenty years ago, a collaboration of this nature was impossible because our communities were busy fighting to have the dominant culture accept our cultural identity. We did not have access to the telecommunications platforms that we have today. My hope for this project's legacy is these patterns for making traditional regalia will represent this time and place, and will serve many future generations of Abenaki families and people who choose to wear clothing representative of their cultural identity.

¹⁷ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, (Blackwood, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 124.

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