

TASK

Alaska Native Traditional Clothing 7 Days Grades 9–12, Cultural Arts

Written By: Robyn Husemann

Overview:

In this unit, students learn traditional methods of making qaspeq/atikluk from a video, reading articles, and by engaging with local Elders during a classroom visit.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn traditional methods of sewing clothing.

NGSS and Alaska Standards:

- **Alaska Cultural Standard A.2** Students recount their own genealogy and family history (Lesson 1)
- **Alaska Cultural Standard A.6** Students live a life in accordance with the cultural values and traditions of the local community and integrate them into their everyday behavior (Lesson 1)
- **Alaska Cultural Standard B.2** Students make effective use of the knowledge, skills, and ways of knowing from their own cultural traditions to learn about the larger world in which they live (Lesson 2)
- **Alaska Cultural Standard D.1** Students acquire in-depth cultural knowledge through active participation and meaningful interaction with Elders (Lessons 2, 3)
- **Alaska Cultural Standard D.3** Students interact with Elders in a loving and respectful way that demonstrates an appreciation of their role as culture-bearers and educators in the community.
- **Alaska Cultural Standard E.5** Students recognize how and why cultures change over time (Lessons 2, 3)

Lesson Titles and Overviews:

Lesson 1—*The Art and Technique of Traditional Clothing*: In this lesson, students watch a short video, read short articles, and discuss traditional methods of making clothing—especially the qaspeq/atikluk.

Materials Needed:

- Computer with access to the internet and connection to a projector
- YouTube video: “The Art and Technique of Inuit Clothing”
- “The Art and Technique of Traditional Clothing” article
- “The Original Hoodie” article

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Lesson 2—*Learning from Our Elders*: In this lesson, four Elders visit the classroom to share traditional methods of making qaspeq/atikluk. Students then practice different sewing techniques, using some of the traditional methods.

Materials Needed:

- Material/fabric
- Thread
- Needles
- Scissors (optional)
- Measuring tape (flexible to measure fabric)

Note: It is prudent to check with guests to determine what additional materials they might need.

Lesson 3—*Let's Sew!* In this lesson, students measure, rip, and sew their own qaspeq/atikluk. Elders and the teacher offer assistance and guidance.

Materials Needed:

- Material/fabric
- Thread
- Needles
- Scissors (optional)
- Measuring tape (flexible to measure fabric)

Assessment Strategies:

- All Write Round Robin
- Stand up, Hand up, Pair up
- Exit ticket
- Sewing

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Lesson 1—The Art and Technique of Traditional Clothing

Time Needed: 1 class period

Essential Questions:

1. How were qaspeq or atikluk traditionally made?

Engage—Generate interest, make connections to prior knowledge, focus the learning

1. (5 minutes): Instruct students to answer the DIN (Do It Now) activity as they enter the room.
 - a. On a sheet of paper, answer the following question:
In your family, which term do you use: “qaspeq” or “atikluk”?
 - b. Take a class poll to see which term is used more (**Note:** typically, “qaspeq” is a Yup’ik term, while “atikluk” is an Iñupiat term).

Explore—Experience key concepts, collect data and other information to answer questions, develop/refine initial explanations

Tip: Read the articles ahead of class and highlight areas you think will be of particular interest to your students. Flag areas for comprehension questions.

2. (5 minutes): Show students the YouTube video [“The Art and Technique of Inuit Clothing.”](#)
3. (20 minutes): Distribute the articles **“Traditional Inuit Clothing”** and **“The Original Hoodie.”** As a class, read through the articles together.
 - a. During and after reading, ask questions to ensure comprehension.

Explain—Connect prior knowledge to new understanding, facilitate sense-making, introduce formal vocabulary

4. (5–10 minutes): Stand up, Hand up, Pair up. Instruct students to stand up and mingle in the classroom, after about 15 seconds, instruct students to put their hands up and prepare to high-5 another student. This student will become their partner.
 - a. Partners review the articles and write down 2–3 interesting facts.
5. (10 minutes): Using the Kagan “All Write Round Robin” method, invite partners to share their facts/ideas with the class.
 - a. Each student has a piece of paper and a pen or pencil
 - b. As one student shares their fact/idea, other students write this fact/idea in their notes. This continues around the room until all students have shared and/or all ideas/facts have been presented.

Evaluate—Assess or demonstrate understanding of new learning (self, peer, and/or teacher)

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6. (5 minutes): Exit Ticket. On a slip of paper, students write one new fact they learned about the making of traditional clothing or the making of qaspeq/atikluk.

Resources:

- Musée McCord Museum. 2008. "The Art and Technique of Inuit Clothing: Betty Kobayashi Issenman." YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NdHDdB62ak>
- Above and Beyond—Canada's Arctic Journal. 2018. "Traditional Inuit Clothing." 28 December 2018. Available at: <http://arcticjournal.ca/featured/traditional-inuit-clothing/>
- Brown, E. 2016. "'The Original Hoodie:' Sharing the Beauty and Joy of the Alaska Kuspuk." *Anchorage Daily News*. 10 October 2016. Available at: <https://www.adn.com/alaska-life/we-alaskans/2016/10/09/the-original-hoodie-sharing-the-beauty-and-joy-of-the-alaska-kuspuk/>

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Lesson 2—Learning from Our Elders

Time Needed: 1 class period

Essential Questions:

1. How are traditional methods used today?

Engage—Generate interest, make connections to prior knowledge, focus the learning

Tip: Ensure you use culturally appropriate methods to invite and welcome Elders into your classroom. Work with cultural experts in the school to learn and practice cultural sensitivity.

1. (5 minutes): Post the following question on the board:

What is one traditional method for making qaspeq/atikluk that your family uses?

- a. As students enter the room, ask them to think about the question.
- b. When class begins, invite students to share their thoughts with the class.

Explain—Connect prior knowledge to new understanding, facilitate sense-making, introduce formal vocabulary

Teacher Note: Learn culturally appropriate ways of introducing Elders to the classroom. Ensure that all students practice honor during the classroom by listening politely to what the Elders teach.

2. (25–30 minutes): After introducing the Elders to the class, allow Elders to lead a discussion around the traditional methods of making qaspeq/atikluk. Elders may wish to discuss or demonstrate:
 - a. types of material
 - b. methods of measuring
 - c. cutting/ripping
 - d. sewing techniques
 - e. traditional uses

Extend—Apply new learning to a novel or similar situation and/or extend learning beyond the concept that was explored originally

1. (15–25 minutes): Arrange students into groups of 4 and distribute fabrics, threads, and needles. Instruct each group to choose a specific method to try.
 - a. After each group has had sufficient practice time with one technique, instruct them to choose another technique and practice it.

Teacher Note: prior to class, work with Elders to determine how this section should be led. Will each Elder participate in a different station use / demonstrate a different technique? Will each Elder simply observe and offer suggestions?

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Evaluate—Assess or demonstrate understanding of new learning (self, peer, and/or teacher)

3. (5 minutes): Stand up, Hand up, Pair up. Instruct students to stand and mingle in the classroom, after 15 seconds, instruct them to put their hands in the air and high-five another student. This student is now their partner.
 - a. Partners share their favorite traditional method for measuring garments.

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Lesson 3—Let's Sew!

Time Needed: 5 class periods

Engage—*Generate interest, make connections to prior knowledge, focus the learning*

1. (5 minutes): Ask students to share one way that modern technology has made it easier to make qaspeq/atikluk.

Extend—*Apply new learning to a novel or similar situation and/or extend learning beyond the concept that was explored originally*

2. (5 class periods): Explain that with guidance from Elders, students will be making their own qaspeq/atikluk.
 - a. On the first day, students will spend time measuring and ripping their fabric, using traditional methods.
 - b. After making appropriate measurements, students will begin working, with the Elders' guidance, to place and sew specific sections.
 - c. After the garment has been sewn, students will spend time personalizing their garment.
 - d. The last 5 minutes of each class should be devoted to tidying and safely storing their garments for the next class.

"Alexa, play Anchorage Daily News."

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

"The original hoodie': Sharing the beauty and joy of the Alaska kuspuk

✍ Author: Elissa Brown © Updated: October 10, 2016 📅 Published October 9, 2016



Instructor Bethany Fernstrom (front) and students Jackie Edwards, Audrey Cook, Kelly Frost and Andrea Gilstad model their finished garments at the end of a two-day Kuspuk-making class in Anchorage on Sept. 17, 2016. (Bob Hallinen / Alaska Dispatch News)

Ripping fabric can sound like music.

In Toksook Bay, a small village on the Bering Sea, Bethany Fernstrom learned the traditional ripping techniques to make her first kuspuk. Sitting on the warm living room floor of a resident's home, she learned to measure fabric panels against her body, rip the correct sizing, and then sew them into the Alaska Native garment. Ripping sounds filled the small house, joining the murmur of voices and the hum of sewing machines to create an arctic symphony.

Generally characterized by the large front pocket and hood, kuspuk (Yup'ik spelling is qaspeq, pronounced kus-puk) are worn by women, men and children, and they dance across the realms of practical and decorative. They are worn for everything from berry picking to hunting, dancing to drumming, daily life to special occasions.

Since first learning kuspuk-making in 2011, Fernstrom has ripped and sewn several thousand kuspuks and taught hundreds of Alaskans to sew their own. With her new project, Kuspuks for All, she aims to collect traditional knowledge and celebrate Native culture one kuspuk at a time.

The original hoodie

In the mid-to-late 1800s, whaling ships traveled along the Alaska coastline and traded goods with Natives. Whalers brought flour and sugar in large cotton sacks. To utilize the extra sacks, Native women began sewing tops for themselves and their families.

The kuspuk designs were inspired by the fur-and-intestine parkas worn during harsh winter months, but the cotton cloth provided a comfortable, lightweight garment to wear in warmer weather. Fernstrom likes to refer to the kuspuk as "the original hoodie." There are endless stylistic differences in design, with variations of the pocket, hood, body length, sleeve cut and trimming.

"Often, these patterns are handed down from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter, and a family will have their own pattern," said Aaron Leggett, curator of Alaska history and culture at the Anchorage Museum. "Sometimes whole villages will have a style. At the same time, there is a lot of individual creativity that goes into it."

Now, Leggett said, the kuspuks have become ubiquitous in Alaska, with even the state Legislature practicing Kuspuk Fridays in Juneau.

Five years ago, Fernstrom had just begun teaching fourth grade in Toksook Bay when she saw her first kuspuk. A fellow teacher invited her over and showed her how to rip and sew her own.

Fernstrom remembers walking through the snow with her sewing machine, finally reaching a small house on the end of the wind-swept tundra. Passing the sealskin in the arctic entry and knocking on the main door, she heard hollers to come on in and was greeted by three generations of smiling faces.

"As soon as I put on my first kuspuk, I knew I wanted to make another," Fernstrom said.

'Bonding experience'

For the next few years, she sewed informally, making kuspuks and giving them away. She was invited to take part in large Toksook Bay celebrations — potlatches — where extended families wore matching kuspuks. Several times, Fernstrom joined the gathering of women to sew the tops, and the sense of camaraderie stuck with her.

"Women sewing together — there's something really special about that," Fernstrom said. "The experience of making these garments was more than an idle chore; it was a bonding experience that they shared together."

Fernstrom moved to Fairbanks in 2012 and continued to sew and sell kuspuks at the local farmers market, but she missed village life.

Community, interwoven

Meanwhile, in Wales, a remote village jutting into the Bering Strait, a school principal was on a hunt. Roxie Quick of the Wales School had just received a grant for sewing machines and fabrics, which she was hoping to utilize in the school and community, ideally relating to kuspuks. She was looking for someone to spearhead the project.

Enter Bethany Fernstrom, a teacher and passionate seamstress with kuspuk experience. Hired to teach first and second grade, she taught sewing to the whole school in small group sessions. Before long, all 38 students in the school had their own kuspuks.

Quick recalls going into the classrooms to watch sewing circles.

"They would talk to each other, laughing, sewing," she said. "At the end of all that, you see them wearing their garment to school and they're glowing. There's such a sense of achievement."

Fernstrom started an informal sewing group on the weekends for community members. When she realized that many of the women didn't own their own kuspuks or know how to make them, she started teaching the traditional techniques she had learned in Toksook Bay.

"The community quickly buzzed," Quick said. "They were happy, they were sewing. Watching the resurrection of cultural sewing and camaraderie in the circles was so heartwarming."

'Faint memories'

The 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic hit Wales particularly hard, killing more than half the population and orphaning dozens of children.

"Even now, many community elders have only faint memories of how their mothers and grandmothers made their kuspuks," Fernstrom said.

Fernstrom saw how teaching kuspuk-making could be a way of building community and reviving cultural knowledge.

"What really makes the process of sharing this knowledge so special is that thread of connection, from person to person, mother to daughter, friend to friend, which weaves each new artist into a much larger tapestry," she said.

Kuspuks for all

On a recent bright, cold Saturday in Anchorage, I showed up at my friend Elizabeth's house for a kuspuk class. A circle of 10 women sat on the living room floor, fabrics splayed before us as Fernstrom explained the history and background behind the garment. She currently lives in Unalakleet but travels to teach one or two kuspuk classes a month.

[More about the group Kuspuks For All]

Then the ripping began. Using our own bodies for measurement, we cut small notches in the fabric, then ripped them the rest of the way apart — allowing the cloth to rip along the weaving's naturally straight lines.

Our host, Elizabeth Knapp, had attended a kuspuk party several months earlier and enjoyed it so much she decided to host her own.

"It's a community thing," Knapp said. "I get inspired by seeing everyone else's fabric and it's fun to get to know the other people in the group. Through the pocket design and fabric choices, you can tell a lot about the kuspuk-maker. Decisions can say a lot about a person's personality."

Each attendee brings fabric, a sewing machine and scissors. The host provides tables, floor space and ironing stations.

"Hours can fly by in what seems like minutes," Fernstrom explained. "You forget the world beyond the humming of the machines and the company you keep."

It was true. Fernstrom explained what to do, and we formed work clusters throughout the house.

We chatted, sometimes falling silent with concentration or exclaiming as we finished sections.

"I love teaching kuspuk classes," Fernstrom said. "It provides an opportunity to pass on the traditional way of ripping and sewing this beautiful and unique garment, and also impart the importance of the history behind its creation and the methods used to produce it."

She loves the moment someone tries on the kuspuk for the first time, and I understand why. As I slipped my purple and teal kuspuk over my head, there was a moment of hesitation, and then I looked in the mirror and grinned. It felt perfect.

An Alaska cultural fabric

Fernstrom has taught classes across Alaska: in schools, community centers and private homes. She has a broader vision for spreading kuspuk awareness: her project, Kuspuks for All, is a celebration of Alaska cultures and traditional knowledge, starting with a book inspired by dozens of conversations with kuspuk-makers from diverse villages.

It will not be a how-to guide.

"It's a very 'white-culture' thing to be inclined to teach things through writing, wanting to make it searchable on the internet, make a YouTube how-to video," Fernstrom said.

Rather, the book will include stories of the kuspuk-making experience as well as an index of photos of styles from different regions. It will serve as a medium to preserve the art of kuspuk-making and share it with future generations. Fernstrom hopes the book will inspire schools across the state use kuspuks to

engage students in Alaska history and cultures.

Afterward, Fernstrom intends Kuspuks for All to evolve into a nonprofit to support Alaska Native youth in completing a college education. The support will take the form of housing, part-time employment, access to free transportation and community meetings. Instead of financial support it will help foster an environment for students to learn life skills to be successful away from their communities.

Fernstrom is not Alaska Native, but her Toksook Bay teachers were, and she has lived in small Alaska villages over the past five years.

"The majority of Alaska Natives that I have come across throughout the state and shared my mission with are very supportive and grateful that the knowledge from their culture is being shared," Fernstrom said.

The only questioning Fernstrom has encountered came from a handful of non-Native people and, initially, herself.

"I knew I loved kuspuks from the day I started making them, but it took me five years to start doing something (about) it because of the hesitation of whether I should, because of the tradition not being my own," Fernstrom said.

After long conversations, travel and self-reflection, Fernstrom realized there would be naysayers no matter what, but this work was important and she felt drawn to it; her race didn't make the mission any less important or meaningful.

Fernstrom acknowledges that she is just one person, but she is on a quest — and it starts with the sound of ripping cloth, a reminder of kuspuks past and present.

"It is my hope that some day all Native and non-Native people in Alaska can join together to celebrate this state's rich history and culture — and if that happens to be one kuspuks at a time, I am up for the challenge."

Elissa Brown is an Anchorage-based freelance writer.

Comments

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ABOVE & BEYOND – CANADA'S ARCTIC JOURNAL

Traditional Inuit clothing

By ABOVE & BEYOND - December 28, 2018



Fur clothing. Fur clothing requires a lot of preparation, yet many women even in pre-contact times went beyond the basics, by juxtaposing contrasting colours to make the clothing look attractive. Skin clothing is extremely warm but the fur wears down comparatively quickly and, when the people lived on the land, it required replacing every year which made for a lot of work for the women.

A means of survival

One of the critical skills that enabled pre-contact Inuit to survive in a harsh environment was the women's ability to make warm clothing. The women had to clean the caribou or seal skins and then sew them into clothing every fall for each member of the family. There would be two sets of caribou clothing per person, one with the fur facing in, the other with the fur facing out. The woman's crescent-shaped knife, the ulu, was used for cutting, while sinew from the caribou was transformed into waterproof thread for both winter caribou clothing and summer/fall sealskin outfits. Needles were made from bird or fish bones or slices of ivory. Both women and men carried a sewing kit in a bag hung around their necks for emergency repairs when travelling. The skill involved in creating clothing from raw animal pelts, let alone the intricate designs often sewn into the clothing (frequently under very harsh light and climate conditions), pay witness to the artistic abilities of Inuit seamstresses. Survival of a family depended in large part on the woman's ability to produce warm clothing and to pass on her skills to her daughters.



Fur clothing. Fur clothing requires a lot of preparation, yet many women even in pre-contact times went beyond the basics, by juxtaposing contrasting colours to make the clothing look attractive. Skin clothing is extremely warm but the fur wears down comparatively quickly and, when the people lived on the land, it required replacing every year which made for a lot of work for the women.



Beaded amoutit. April 1, 1999, the day Nunavut came into being, saw a huge unofficial fashion display in Iqaluit put on by Inuit women. Traditional and modern variations of Inuit clothing were to be seen everywhere, with skin, fur, beaded and duffe parkas and amoutit on every corner. In this photo Dorothy and Lilian Aglukkaq stand with Alexina Kublu in front of the Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. offices.

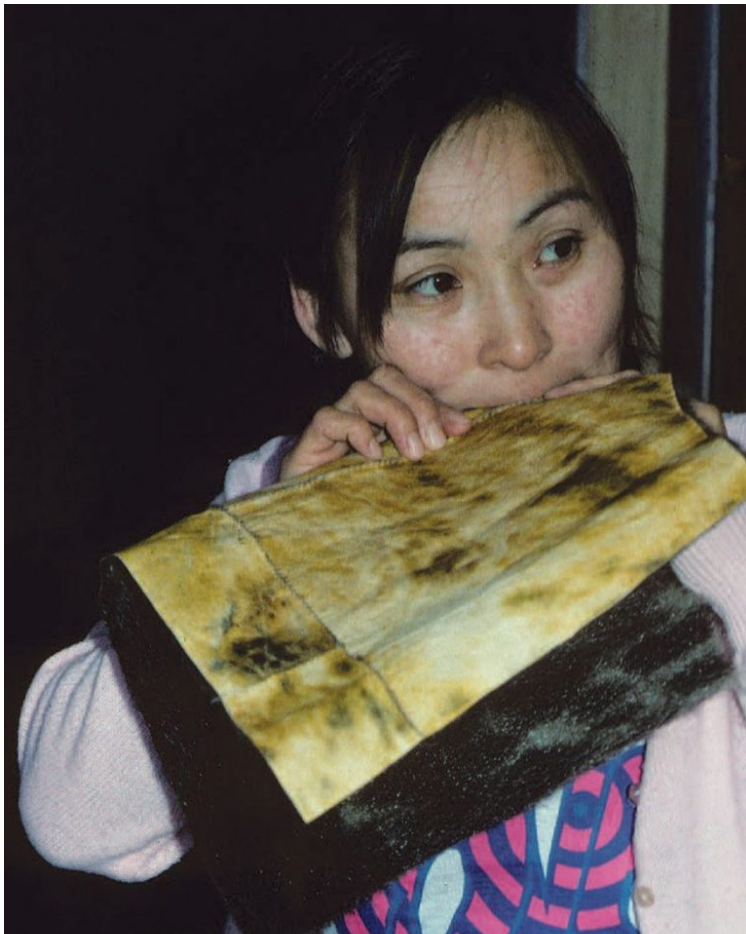




On display. (right) Each Canada Day and Nunavut Day sees a display of women's fashion in Iqaluit, usually a mixture of the traditional caribou and seal fur clothing contrasting with the white summer amoutit usually decorated with intricate beadwork. Beads came north as trade goods with the whalers in the 19th century and have been popular ever since.



Teaching traditions. (above) Annie Nauyaq was among the best seamstresses of her time in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Proud of their Inuit heritage, she and her husband Eliyah were inummariit, examples of Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit (Inuit Traditional Knowledge) in daily practice. In the photo Annie cuts a skin as part of a class at the high school where she taught for several decades.



Making kamiiit. (top left) The high-quality sewing by Inuit women was critical to the survival of the people when they lived on the land. Skins had to be cleaned, dried and then chewed to be soft enough to sew with sinew, as illustrated here by Mary Ittunga from Taloyoak, Nunavut.





Survival suits. Fur clothing, as worn here by Joanasi Qarpik, was critical to Inuit survival in traditional times. When the men went hunting in winter, their wives made them two layers of caribou clothing, the first with the fur turned inside, the second with the fur on the outside. Kamiit (skin boots) would also consist of at least two layers of caribou skins, sometimes also packed with dried grass or (after contact with whalers) shredded hemp rope as an extra insulator. Summer would often see the caribou clothing replaced by sealskin due to its waterproof qualities.

Nick Newbery taught in several communities in Nunavut from 1976-2005. He would like to acknowledge the assistance he received for this article from Bert Rose, northern educator and long-time resident of Nunavut. The photos in this article are from Nick's Arctic photo collection that can be found at www.newberyphotoarchives.ca and should be viewed from a historical perspective.



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