

Methodology Paper  
Transmitting Yup'ik Knowledge  
through the Art of Skin Sewing

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## Introduction

Today in New Stuyahok, the gap between the students and the elders is widening. We must, as parents and community members, include our elders in the education system. Elders have a lot to teach us. The elders are eager to pass on traditional knowledge so information can be shared with the next generation. When they do teach, they have high expectations for us to become respectful human beings. According to the 2012 US Census, there are 523 individuals who live in New Stuyahok. Only 2% (8) are in the 75 to 84 age range and 0.39% (2) are 85 years or older.

According to the New Stuyahok school-wide improvement plan, “limited staff knowledge of local culture inhibits the inclusion of culture in the classroom” (Southwest Region Schools). The number of opportunities for youth and adult education in *Yugstuun* in New Stuyahok are too few (Bristol Bay Native Association, Alaska Native Education grant). Today, like many Indigenous groups, they are struggling to keep their culture intact as their languages and traditions are being rapidly absorbed through Western assimilation.

It is vitally important to preserve the traditional way of life before it is lost by revamping and re- developing the curriculum based in the Yup’ik culture. One area of concern is the need to teach the traditional art of skin sewing. It is through this art that culture bearers such as Elders, and parents like me, can pass the knowledge and traditions of their rich Yup’ik culture to younger generations. The creation of my project: *Transmitting Yupik Knowledge through the Art of Skin Sewing* can be one way to address and enhance cultural knowledge where the art is slowly fading away.

## **Brief Autobiographical Information**

I am a lifelong learner. I have been involved in the field of education since I began working as an instructional aide in 1982 for Chief Ivan Blunka Schools in New Stuyahok. Since then, I have successfully earned my Associate of Arts and Associates of Applied Science in Developmental Disabilities in 1993/1994 through the University Of Alaska Prince William Sound Community College.

As a lifelong Yup'ik resident of this region, I am very familiar with its people, its culture, and their economic needs. As a Bachelor of Arts graduate from University of Alaska Fairbanks Rural Development Program and a current Master's degree program student, it is my goal to inform our local Bristol Bay community members on the vast array of economic development opportunities.

I am employed by the Bristol Bay Native Association as the Economic Development Program Manager. I support and promote culturally appropriate and sustainable economic development through implementation of the Bristol Bay Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Document. The Bristol Bay CEDS planning process develops strategies and action plans consistent with the Regional Vision to increase jobs and investment in the region and improve the economy. My position also plays an important networking and information-disseminating role among the Tribes, Bristol Bay entities, and government agencies.

Prior to my current position, I have spent the last five years managing, directing, training and evaluating the student services department at the UAF-Bristol Bay Campus. During my employment I transmitted substantial skills in promoting economic opportunities for the residents of Bristol Bay by teaching various one credit courses such as skin sewing as an adjunct instructor. As an accomplished skin sewing artist, I want to ensure that the methods of skin sewing will be shared and passed down for the next generation.

## **What I expected to do: My project**

I developed a basic skin-sewing manual, *Transmitting Yup'ik Knowledge through the Art of Skin Sewing*, to demonstrate the way Yup'ik people learn new skills by using information learned about Indigenous knowledge systems in my Master's studies and readings for this project, combined with my own personal experience as a professional skin sewer. It is through this skill that we can reaffirm our Yup'ik culture, language, and traditions. The basic manual is a step-by-step process of laying down the patterns, cutting and sewing each piece, including some historic information, introducing some *Yugstuun* words, and providing detailed, illustrated instructions on how to hand sew each piece together to create wearable traditional Indigenous fur mittens and hats.

## **Where did this idea come from?**

*Transmitting Yup'ik Knowledge through the Art of Skin Sewing* is a result of my commitment to share what I have learned as a professional skin sewer. During the fall of 2006, I had applied for an Alaska Federation of Natives' Alaska Market Place grant. One of the requirements for this grant heightened my desire to create something tangible that could be used for other individuals. I focused on skin sewing and realized that I could create a project that allowed me to share my knowledge for others to use. I began my research, and I discovered that there was only one book on skin-sewing techniques, *Secrets of Eskimo Skin Sewing*, written by Edna Wilder.

## Methodology

The majority of my research was focused on objective and secondary research. This type of research is based “on factual observation of phenomena” (Kawagley, 1995. P. 144). This research method helped me to address a specific problem, and how my research and project were designed to provide pertinent information (Yup’ik knowledge) to address the need to share the information I gained as a professional skin sewer to ensure that the knowledge will be handed down to the next generation. As I studied the various components of indigenous knowledge, I realized that I had always had this form of knowledge imbedded in my memories to teach to my children and others about our Yupik culture. This wealth of knowledge that I had gained includes denotative statements -” know-how”, “knowing how to live”, “how to act”, ”how to listen”, “how to behave”-practical, pragmatic rules that bind society together (Nuthall, M. 2002. p. 73).

When you live in this environment by knowing how to live, how to act, how to behave, and how to listen and observe you acquire traditional knowledge. By handing down our Yupik epistemologies, we will foster and keep our rich cultural heritage alive and strong. Each of us is responsible for keeping our culture alive. All we need to do is invite the next generation of cultural bearers to a dialogue and or a conversation about their lives and how they lived and share the stories that connect us to our ancestors, to our history and to our existence of who we are and where we came from.

Secondary research methods allowed me to read other experts' published papers to learn something new about my topic, to examine what others have said and written about it, and to review in order to reach a conclusion about my ideas on the topic. I also conducted in-depth research using the internet to view historic pictures from the Smithsonian Institute library and using other valuable reading material such as Ann Fienup-Riordan’s book, *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live*.



My journey began when I enrolled in the Rural Development Department's Master's program in the fall of 2007. I had learned the importance of community-based research principles and practices while enrolled in RD 650. That class allowed me to determine a focus group towards my research.

### **New Stuyahok**

The present location is the third site that villagers can remember. The village moved downriver to the Mulchatna area from the "Old Village" in 1918. During the 1920s and 30s, the village was engaged in herding reindeer for the U.S. government. However, by 1942 the herd had dwindled to nothing; the village had been subjected to flooding; and the site was too far inland even to receive barge service. So in 1942, the village moved downriver again to its present location. Stuyahok appropriately means "going downriver place." The first school was built in 1961. A post office was also established during that year. An airstrip was built soon thereafter, and the 1960s saw a 40% increase in the village population (Southwest Region Schools).

New Stuyahok is homeland to the Yupik, a diverse group of Indigenous peoples having their own unique culture, language, histories, and economics ranging from reindeer herding, subsistence lifestyle, and now commercial pursuits, relying on natural resources for their economic and cultural survival. For thousands of years, their ancestors have relied on this land for its salmon, plants, berries, and animals to sustain their rich cultural heritage. These subsistence foods are vitally important to the well-being of the Native people in this region. Although traditional ways of gathering have changed, hunting, fishing, and gathering still play a vital role in this Yupik community.

The New Stuyahok region is somewhat isolated. There are no roads to connect the communities. The only form of access is by air, boat, and snow machine. New Stuyahok is located on the Nushagak River, 52 miles northeast of Dillingham.

Children are taught Yup'ik ways of knowing by inviting the elders into the school classroom. Since 1997, the inclusion of the elders into the classrooms has been coordinated by my sister, Margie who like me was taught to highly regard elders' knowledge. The children are actively engaging in Yup'ik knowledge. The elders are transmitting their knowledge by teaching various traditional methods such as storytelling, building traditional tools, and proper ways of handling an animal. I had the wonderful opportunity to watch a video that Margie had recorded about the process of skinning a beaver. An elderly man was demonstrating "how to" skin the animal, talking in both Yugstun and broken English. The children that were observing were paying attention to every detail. Once the animal was skinned, my Mom then demonstrated how to properly cut the animal. She talked about making certain you don't leave remnants on the floor because the animal's spirit will be hurt, and the man will not be as successful the next time he goes out trapping. Explanations of various body parts were taught to these children. Teaching western science was demonstrated by this process, a process in western terms known as dissecting an animal. What I saw was how every child that was engaged in this activity learned by observation.

During the 10 years that my husband and I lived in the village, trapping played an essential role in earning much needed income. My father, Nick Gumlickpuk, taught my husband traditional methods of trapping by demonstrating the spirit of the animal. The animal was given to him, so Dad placed a dry fish skin into the esophagus of a fox. This demonstration is still practiced in my family.

## **Research and questions**

As part of my research, I needed to come up with questions to illustrate how the art of skin sewing transmits Yup'ik knowledge so I devised two questions to strengthen my project. The purpose of this research is twofold. The first purpose is to create a basic skin sewing manual from the insider perspective. The second purpose is to demonstrate how the art of skin sewing transmits Yup'ik knowledge.

Research Question One: What is traditional skin sewing?

Question two: How does the art of skin sewing transmit Yup'ik knowledge? This paper will consist of two parts. Part one focuses on the historical information on skin sewing. Part two will focus on how skin sewing transmits Yup'ik knowledge.

### **Part one: Historical skin sewing information**

Further in-depth research revealed that traditional mittens were sewn from fish skin and lined with twined grass “are absorbent and wick moisture away from the skin to keep it warm and dry” (Riordan, 2007. p. 231). I demonstrate a similar technique when constructing mitten liners in my manual, *Transmitting Yup'ik Knowledge through the Art of Skin Sewing* where I use polar fleece, a synthetic material made out of recycled plastic bottles that resists water. Grass was also used to sew water proof stitches “to reinforce seams when women sewed waterproof garments” (Riordan, 2007. p. 229). My father remembers wearing fur mittens as a child. He stated that the fish mittens were mainly used by coastal Yup'iks. (Personal interview Nick Gumlickpuk, April 24, 2014).



### **Traditional preparation of skins**

In my manual, I demonstrated that I use professionally tanned hides. During my research, I discovered that women prepared the skins in different ways. “Most land animal skins were tanned with the help of skin scrapers” (Riordan. 2007. p. 304) and urine was used to wash away the natural oils. The process required the women to continually stretch the skin and remove the top layer using the scraper. Ash was also used to remove hair. “Ash is strongly alkaline. Hair and fur are made up of a protein called keratin. Alkaline substances cause the disulfide molecular bonds in keratin to dissociate, thus weakening the hair or fur and making it easier to break off. Modern hair removers use this same principle” (Riordan. 2007. P. 304).

Teaching some components of traditional methods of tanning fur is still being practiced today for the high school students in New Stuyahok. In 1997, when my sister Margie became the Bi-lingual instructor, she invited elders into her program to teach this method. She did state that although we used chemicals, the students were taught to make a fur scraper and learned to pull, stretch and scrap skin off the animals.

### **Transmitting Yup'ik knowledge through the art of skin sewing**

There are so many other valuable skills that can be taught through the art of skin sewing. What I am demonstrating in the manual are small samples of transmitting knowledge through the art of skin sewing. Classes such as RD 612 Traditional Ecological Knowledge and RD 608 Indigenous Knowledge Systems provided me with epistemological properties and different Indigenous worldviews. I began to formalize these ideas and explored ways in which the art of skin sewing transmits knowledge and the importance of sharing what I have mastered and learned as a professional student and skin sewer.

I am continually reminded that “the Yupiaq person’s methodologies include observation, experience, social interaction, and listening to the conversations and interrogations of the natural and spiritual worlds with the mind” (Kawagley. 1995. p. 18). In my manual, I recollected how I observed my Grandmother take out her articles to sew. I was learning through the process of observation just as I demonstrated with my grandchildren how to lay out the patterns on my fur products. Learning takes place in the form of observation in everything that I do. I can proudly say that we have five generations of transmitting Yup’ik knowledge through the art of skin sewing. I was taught by my Grandmother, by learning and watching her skin sew. I than taught my children who observed me while I sewed up my garments. My daughter now skin sews which in turn allows her daughter to observe the process of skin sewing.

As my sewing experience increased, I learned how to master the art of skin sewing by trial and error. I was taught to sit down and observe how to lay out the patterns of a small bootie by my Aunt, Annie Andrew. During this process, she and her friend described how to lay down the patterns on the leather piece as I sat down next to them. They diligently traced out each piece, cut the leather and demonstrated how to sew the pieces together. Aunt Annie than instructed me to do the same so I very proudly did as I was told. She than told me to stitch the pieces together. When I completed the project, I showed her what I had done. After spending hours on my project, she took one look at my sewing, and began pulling it apart. I had made a mistake and had to redo my stitches. I never forgot this frustrating experience. I never made that mistake again and was always very careful to make certain my stitches were near perfect. This over all process is how I internalized precise skin sewing techniques from my Aunt.

Displaying proper social interactions amongst other individuals can be transmitted by the art of sewing. Sewing was, and still is, a social interaction between women and young children. This is a time where some valuable teaching lessons were taught. It is through listening to the

elderly women tell their stories or lessons, valuable listening skills are taught, as well as respect. I was trained by my mother, grandmother and my aunts to know who I am as a Yupik woman. I was taught to be an active community member; I must display certain responsibilities to follow traditional social interpersonal communication styles and mainly how to continue to partake in our subsistence lifestyle. I was taught as a young girl to cook, clean, participate in subsistence activities such as splitting fish, gathering berries and skin sew. I was also taught by my late grandfather to learn both western and traditional knowledge never forgetting to transmit that knowledge to my children. I have taught my children to be respectful towards others and mainly respecting our elders and their knowledge. I see my children well balanced and well versed to live in both worlds just as I had struggled to do so.

As Oscar Kawagley's tetrahedral suggests, "the Yupiaq infrastructure had to include a dynamic sense of sacredness" (1995:23). The sewing tools that were created were constructed out of natural materials and "less likely to offend the hunted animal" (1995:23). I was taught to carefully gather the fur remnants so I would not offend the animal spirits to ensure the next time my husband goes out trapping he will be successful. "Animals and humans share the ability to feel and to know" (Riordan. 2007.p. 19). I was taught to respect our environment and the animals that were given to us. Respecting our animals is essential and treating them with the proper traditional methods is important. Because the animals are gifts that were given to us, we were careful not to offend the animal spirit.

Kawagley (1999) points out that one of the best ways for Native Alaska people to retain their identities is through learning and use of their Native language as it connects them to spiritual and philosophical worldviews of their ancestors. Moreover, student exposure to Yupiaq arts and crafts should be woven into their education experience because "art is an important avenue for opening new unseen worlds as well as getting to know oneself" (Kawagley 1999, p.

48). When I teach skin sewing, I do teach some Yup'ik words in relation to the tools needed. I also incorporated some Yup'ik words in my manual to enrich the transmission of Yup'ik knowledge.

Another essential aspect of transmitting Yup'ik knowledge through the art of skin sewing is the traditional methods of visualizing proportions. I use precise patterns for making fur mittens and trapper-style hats. These products require me to look at the body of the person for whom they are to be made and to visualize proportions in body form (including bone structure and musculature) and size in order. For instance, I must determine the number of skins needed. In sewing together the skins, I am reminded of the family history of the patterns, and the use of various furs, taking advantage of their beneficial qualities.

The Alaska Native people also had a numbering system (Lipka, 1994). The Yup'ik people's numbering system used a base of 20. Ten fingers and 10 toes are needed to make a complete person. The digits are attached to appendages which are in turn attached to the body. The counting system was necessary for determining the number of furs needed to make an article of clothing (Lipka, 1994). For example, it takes two large beaver skins to sew the trapper hats and gauntlets.

### **Paying attention to the environment**

There are several types of traditional beliefs about beaver. As with other animals their signs could be read to foretell weather or some coming event. My father, Nick Gumlickpuk, stated, "If the beaver built a small house and stored little food, a short winter was expected. If he built an extra big house, a long winter was coming" (personal interview, February 2014).

Trappers can also predict how many beaver live in their homes by paying attention to their feed pile.



## **The step by step process**

After extensive research, countless hours of reading my literature, and numerous hours spent on the computer to review Yup'ik artifacts on the web I was finally ready to assemble my basic skin sewing manual. The process was daunting because I had to determine the layout, and the content of the written material, to ensure that the transmission of Yup'ik knowledge was incorporated into the document, and figure out where the pictures should be pasted into the document. I had other people help me review the content, making certain that all the step by step processes were added to the manual. People have different learning methods. Some like to just read the step by step processes and others like demonstrations such as pictures. I learned this from teaching skin sewing to other members of the community. Some wanted visual aids, while others needed to observe how to sew. During one of my classes, a student said that I should create a step by step manual using visual aids. In my manual, I do have the basic written step by step process and a picture next to the "how to" sections.

Once my first draft was complete, I had to edit various components of the manual. This was not the first revision I had to do. I had at least three more revisions to meet the requirements for academia.



## Challenges and lessons learned

One of the many challenges this project had was the lack of historical information about skin sewing. My reading materials about the region featured no historical accounts of when the trapper hat was adapted which offers very little research on the subject area.

Final limitations toward this project were the loss of key skin sewers who have passed away since I began my study. There is a need to ensure that the traditional methods of skin sewing will remain strong, so I created the manual *Transmitting Yup'ik Knowledge through the Art of Skin Sewing*. As a lifelong member of New Stuyahok, I struggled “individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on one side, and the realities that I encountered amongst my own” (Smith. 1999. p.5). Other factors that I struggled with were my outside influences such as my western education, and my current employment working on various research projects to obtain statistical data from that community. I did not want to be a “know it all” because of my western education, so I spoke to my family members in their village dialect. When working on my data for my employment, I had to restructure the questions asked so that they could understand what I was trying to obtain. Even though I was raised in that community, I struggled to say proper words to obtain the information needed.

As a student, I also had to be mindful of various guiding principles as a researcher. This meant that I had to follow the Internal Review Boards policies. I noted that I would not interview “human subjects” so my research left some gaps. I would have liked to interview the two women who sew; what do they sew, and who taught them and do they teach this method on to others?

In the last month, I conducted an informal interview to learn how many individuals from that community continued to skin sew fur. I discovered that there are only two individuals who actually sewed fur into hats and mittens. I realized that there is a need to create a manual for skin sewing before the art completely dies away. This class was the first of many steps that I needed

to accomplish my goal. I know now that my Rural Development master's classes strengthened my awareness of transmitting Indigenous knowledge through the art of skin sewing.

My methods and techniques had cultural strengths. I am a Yup'ik, I know the language, the culture, and the traditions and, I witnessed many changes in my own lifetime. The challenge for me was disseminating the information that I have in my heart and that is imbedded in me. It was hard for me to transfer my ways of knowing into written material.

## **Conclusion**

Today, the Yup'ik language and cultural traditions are being rapidly absorbed into the Anglo-American culture. It is important to preserve the traditional cultural methods of skin sewing before they are lost. As New Stuyahok elders are slowly fading away, and the new generations of elders are aging, they are concerned that much of our traditional knowledge needs to be preserved. Therefore, there is an increasing need for culture bearers such as myself to share our culture and traditional wisdom to ensure that the Yup'ik ways of learning will be passed down to the next generation.

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