

# FIRST, THE CARIBOU

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**Abstract:** Everyone in Anaktuvuk Pass can tell you how to make caribou skin masks, the signature village craft. Even first and second graders, who decorate their paper plate versions with fur and add the authenticating silver hand tag identifying Alaskan native crafts. Having been awarded a grant to study the caribou skin mask, it seemed an ethnographic imperative that I too learn firsthand how to make one. The story begins with the advice of veteran mask makers: “First, you gotta get a caribou ....”

**Keywords:** Skin sewing, Masks, Anaktuvuk Pass

“First, you gotta get a caribou,” She looked at me and laughed. I’d heard that advice before. It’s often the opener when Anaktuvuk Pass people demonstrate caribou skin mask making at some venue and someone expresses interest in how to make them. “You wanna learn how to make a mask, well first....”

I was sitting in Lela Ahgook’s living room in the summer of 2002, intent on making a caribou skin mask as part of my study of this village’s signature craft (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Maybe I could I learn something about masks that had escaped me in all the photographing, interviewing of mask makers and note taking that I had previously done. To be frank, the subject of my research was pretty focused and mundane—a single type of tourist art from a single village. It begged for some new insight or approach; making a mask might just offer that window. If not, it would still be fun, and there’s nothing better than having a good time while doing ethnography.

Lela, my friend and a long time mask maker, was recuperating from recent surgery and eager to make some masks to take to the AFN (Alaska Federation of Natives) convention in the fall (Figure 2). “I gotta scrape some skins before I can make masks,” she added. What she didn’t say but implied was that she wasn’t sure she was up to scraping skins so soon following her surgery. I leaped at the opportunity to offer my labor. “I’ll scrape them for you, put me to work.”

From the outset of this project I had every intention of learning by doing, in part because I’ve always liked

doing things with my hands. I’d eagerly signed on for a class in cedarbark basketry three decades ago when I was conducting my dissertation research with the Haida, and the resultant hat I made, if nothing else, convinced some members of my host culture that I was capable of doing something that demanded a measure of skill, stick-to-itiveness, and achievement of an aesthetic standard. Several years later, under the tutelage of none other than master Haida artist Robert Davidson, I failed exquisitely at carving a wooden soapberry spoon and applying to it what I thought was a conceptually brilliant Haida design of a beaver. When no one was looking, I committed the egregious act of taking a piece of sandpaper to my spoon, but in doing so I developed a new respect for woodcarving and the consummate skill required to create what the mind’s eye sees. In the end I had the dubious honor of donating my pathetic art work to Robert Davidson’s personal collection—as an example of what I’m not sure. Skin working seemed more doable than carving. I’d never carved before, or after, my soapberry spoon challenge, but until recent years I’d always sewed my own clothes, clothing for my daughter, wearable art shirts for my husband, quilts. Why not skin sewing, which was what Anaktuvuk Pass mask making was about?

Lela fetched a luxuriant looking caribou hide from the back room and plopped it down on the floor. She reached in a drawer for her small *ikun* (scraper), while her husband Noah disappeared into the back room and returned with a long handled scraper. After trying both, I settled on the long handled one. The short *ikun* had been made for Lela’s smaller hands. The long handled scraper

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<sup>1</sup>The origin and early history of Anaktuvuk Pass mask making is described by Atamian (1966); subsequent developments are described by Blackman (1997). This essay derives from research under a current NSF Arctic Social Sciences grant, “Tourist Art and Traditional Knowledge in Northern Alaska.”

gave more leverage and allowed longer strokes. The job would also go faster with it (Figure 3).

Lela settled into the couch and talked at me as I scraped. “Start at the edges. Always do the edges first so you don’t make holes in it. Don’t scrape where the *kumiks* are,” she instructed, drawing a line with her ulu where the hatching bot fly larvae had pockmarked the skin. “Too bad one side of it’s bloody; I don’t think we can use that for masks.” This skin was teaching me a lot already. After a day of chasing down interviews I was enjoying the vigorous, rhythmic activity of scraping. The dried bits of connective tissue came off in gratifyingly long ribbons, revealing the soft white hide beneath. Talk naturally turned to masks and the wooden molds on which they’re made—who got so-and-so’s when she died—and scrapers—who made the ones belonging to Lela. It had been a year since Lela and I had seen each other, so I wasn’t surprised when she changed the topic. “Tell me your story,” she demanded in a reversal of our customary roles. I began with the biking trip I’d just completed across northern Spain on the Camino de Santiago along the medieval pilgrimage route to that city. She wanted more. “Aren’t you married yet,” she asked. “No,” I answered. “Two marriages and 27 years was enough.”



Figure 2: Lela Ahgook and the author. Photo by Judith Gussler

Noah, Lela’s husband and an indefatigable joker, started in on me. “You’ve got to sing if you’re going to scrape skins. You’ve got to sing, Margaret.” I told him if he’d drum, I’d sing. Fortunately, for all concerned, he didn’t take me up on it. I worked a steady hour that first day on the skin and returned the next afternoon to put in

another hour. As I picked up my shavings and prepared to head home, Lela inspected the skin and said I’d scraped enough for maybe six masks, noting that I would still have to go over all of it again to make it smooth. “Maybe tomorrow,” she invited, “You cut the fur off and go and choose one of my molds to make mask” (Figure 4). They’re made from spruce or cottonwood that comes



Figure 1: Anaktuvuk Pass caribou skin masks

from farther south along the John River, or, increasingly, from pieces of 4 X 4’s and other scrap from building activities in Anaktuvuk Pass. Everyone knows that it was Justus Mekiana back in 1956 who invented this process of applying wet caribou skins to wooden face molds to make masks. Molly Ahgook, Justus’ sister, has one of the first molds

Justus made. Nails fill cracks in the forehead, a wad of paper toweling stuffs a hole worn through the upper lip, and a piece of newspaper glued to a cheek smoothes over its worn, rough spots. Molly’s still using the mold. In every mask maker’s box of molds there’s a story of kinship and community—the reciprocity of husband and wife, a trading partnership, inheritance, a favorite uncle’s and a brother’s Christmas gifts. Even the self-sufficiency of widowhood is recorded in crudely carved replacements for worn out molds.



Figure 3: Scraping the skin with long-handled scraper, *ikun*. Photo by Judith Gussler



Figure 4: Wooden molds for masks

The next day, Lela showed me the places on the skin I needed to rescape. Prematurely confident of my newfound skill, I scraped too much in one spot, putting a small hole in the skin. “You’re in big trouble now,” she chastised. I felt horrible. “That’s OK,” she said. “I’ll make a small mask from that piece.” When she pronounced a length of the neck portion of the hide ready, she simply took her ulu and sliced off a piece. I gasped. I had watched other artists lay down templates or molds and carefully cut around them. “I told you, I don’t put mold down, I just cut. I don’t do it like Doris,” she added, reminding me that in photographing Doris Hugo make masks we were only getting one artist’s way of doing things. “Everybody’s different. I waste lotta skin.”

When the rest of the skin was evenly and smoothly scraped to Lela’s satisfaction, I cut four more squarish pieces with her ulu, copying her example. She gave them a final trimming with her scissors, rounding off the corners. I watched her cut the hair from the back of the pieces with the flat side of her ulu (I had only learned the day before that Nunamiut ulus have one beveled and one flat edge). It looked easy, but of course it wasn’t. Terrified of ruining another piece of skin, I left the hair too long and uneven on the back of the piece I attempted to de-hair. I handed it over to Lela to finish. She’s not averse to using scissors, especially for trimming the finer hair on thinner pieces of skin; one is less likely to cut through the skin with scissors than with an ulu.

“After lunch, we’ll soak them,” she said. I hurried home to a late lunch. The so-called “itinerant apartment” where I was staying is owned by the school district and by last summer had acquired one more wel-

come amenity—a telephone. I decided to phone Lela before returning. “Come over in an hour,” she directed. Forty-five minutes later the phone rang; it was Lela: “What are you doing? I’ve already heated the tea water.” And she didn’t mean for afternoon tea.

She had set an old refrigerator bin on the kitchen floor. She pointed to the stove, “Get the kettle and add cold water to the tea leaves; swirl them around. You can pour it into the bin.” We sat and visited while the mix cooled. Were the skins to be added to water that is too hot, they

would lose their integrity and tear when stitched to the molds. When the tea water had finally cooled to just warmer than lukewarm, we added the mask pieces.

We looked around for objects to weigh down the skin pieces while they soaked; a bottle of oil, a detergent bottle and a ketchup bottle worked just fine. “Ten of 5,” I announced as the pieces were put in to soak. “What are you checking the time for,” she demanded. “You don’t need to time it!” She then showed me how to speed up the color saturation process, taking up a skin piece and twisting it around with one hand while holding it with the other like you’re moving the handle on an old coffee grinder. I continued to consult my watch. The pieces were soaked and twisted for 22 minutes, then wrung out with the hair side out. Some of my poor scraping was evident in the skins; the hair had come off a strip of the backside of one mask because I scraped the other side too thin. I wrung the pieces out with great deliberation, only to be told I’d wrung them too dry. Lela dumped them in the tea again.

Lela sent her two little granddaughters upstairs to fetch her molds and they returned lugging two full plastic bags and a box of wooden faces. Sitting on the floor, Lela took each out, ticking off the names of the makers: John Morry, Amos Morry, Clyde Hugo, John Hugo, Justus, Joshua, Noah, herself. I counted over 30. I chose a John Morry female with high cheekbones. The granddaughters each chose a mold as well. What child can resist putting a mask up to her face and/or dressing it up with a pair of sunglasses?

Lela cut long pieces of artificial sinew from a big bobbin. We split one in half, threading leather-working needles. She handed me a thimble and a plastic bag to protect my lap from the wet skin. I wasn't surprised when Lela warned that she didn't attach her mask to the frame the way that Doris did. Regardless, the bottom line is that the skin must be tight against the mold. The skin is gathered around the perimeter of the mold and three stitches are taken at the nose—two on the sides and one across the bottom; one long stitch is taken at the mouth, and one in each of the eyes. All of them have to be very taut to hold the thick wet skin to the frame, but every maker has a preferred order of making these stitches.

The experience was humbling. Lela sewed four skins to their wooden frames as I struggled with my one, poking myself in the finger and bleeding on my mask, pulling out threads and starting over. She's fast. One time Justus challenged her to see who could put a wet skin on a mold faster. They picked molds the same size, and started at the same time. Lela won, and Justus never suggested competing again.

My mask was a mess. All my sewing experience had not prepared me for stitching wet caribou skin to wood. I didn't get the nose straight or tight enough the first time. I had positioned the skin on the mold leaving too little on the chin and too much around the forehead, and at one place along the side of the face the skin puckered from my gathering stitches. I had to re sew the eyes. Lela was already cleaning up and reminding me that she had to change her clothes for church. Finally, I finished but I forgot and cut off the leftover sinew, leaving nothing for the mask to hang from. Lela took the masks, tied a length of string to the back of mine and hung them all from a piece of clothesline in her boiler room to dry (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Masks sewn to molds and hung to dry

For the First and Second graders at the Nunamiut School in Anaktuvuk Pass, mask making is nothing if not fun. They visit the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum in the village and study the exhibit of mask making there. Curator Grant Spearman brings out the skin masks in his own and the museum's collection. The kids draw pictures of them, hold them up in front of their faces while their teacher snaps their photos. They write about how they are made:

We have to shoot it first and skin it and take off the hair and dip it in tea. Put it on wood and let it dry. Cut out the eyes and decorate it with all kinds of fur.

And then they make their own masks—from paper plates that they paint brown with poster paint. They cut out the eyes and mouths; they glue on bits of fur for beards and hair and ruffs. And again they pose for their teacher, holding up their creations (Figures 6a and 6b). While



Figure 6a: Anaktuvuk Pass school children modeling their masks. Photo by Inge-Lise Jensen

having fun, they learn a bit of art history. They know about the silver hand tag that authenticates a work of art as Alaskan Native made and they attach tags to their own creations. They know the story of the masks' origin and they know that 40 years before they were born, Justus came up with the idea of making masks on molds.

“Your mask is dry,” Lela announced when I saw her at the washeteria two days later. “You gonna come sew this afternoon?” Absolutely. I was at her beck and call.

To set the mask free from its mold Lela used a small sharp pocketknife, deftly cutting off the gathers and leaving a clean edge around the mask. Box cutters work well too. I had learned that from Rachel Riley when she came to Anchorage to demonstrate mask making. It was a

month after 9/11 and her suitcase of mask making supplies contained several box cutters that she had to explain to airport security. Positioning the tip of her pocketknife in one of the eyesockets, Lela traced the shape of an eye; she repeated the process for the other one. She cut along the lines she had just drawn, then did the same for the mouth. “Do you ever look at the shape of the eyes and mouth on the mold when you cut them on the skin?” I asked. “No, I don’t copy it or look at it. I just cut.” She flipped the mask over to the inside, and trimmed off a 1/4” band of the short hair from around each eye and the mouth, assuring that no little hairs would show through to the right side. Then she passed the pocketknife to me. I gingerly cut the eyes on my mask, trying desperately to get them the same size and shape. Lela checked my progress. “Big mouth,” she exclaimed, trying hard not to laugh. “What are you doing, making a man?”



Figure. 6b: Paper plate Anaktuvuk mask made by school child. Photo by James Barker

She began carefully peeling off a thread from a dried stringy slab. “I use real sinew on the face.” She threaded her needle. “Real sinew” is a signifier of authenticity and pride in craft. Skins were always sewn with “real sinew” and in this case the opposition is to artificial sinew, dental floss, or worse, glue. Some mask makers even write “real sinew” on their sales tag along with the iden-

tification of the furs that comprise the mask. As Lela’s student, I too, would use “real sinew” which is very strong but very short compared to the limitless lengths of artificial sinew one can cut from the bobbin.

Eyelashes are a must for masks of either gender and they require fine, soft fur. Newborn caribou or fetal caribou calf fur was used in the early days, but commercially tanned black calfskin has been the fur of choice for years now. Barbara Lindberg, the owner of Lindy’s store in Fairbanks where Anaktuvuk people used to trade masks for groceries and supplies reported that one time a shipment of Anaktuvuk masks arrived at the store sporting false eyelashes. That innovation disappeared quickly; no one wanted Eskimo masks with false eyelashes!<sup>2</sup> Cutting a perfectly even 1/4” wide strip of calfskin with a pocket knife was challenging enough, but sewing these tiny strips on was enough to make me wish humans never had eyelashes in the first place. The fur wouldn’t lie in the right direction, the lashes were too far away from the eyelids, and they bunched up and turned in at the corners. I pulled out my stitches and started over.

Eyebrows are cut from the thin-skinned caribou leg pieces. Lela drew a straight line with her pocketknife to mark the bottom of the eyebrow. With her knife she cut along the top of the eyebrow, then folded it on the line to use it as a template for the other eyebrow. “Sew them on any way you want,” she instructed. The eyebrows were much more forgiving than the eyelashes; one can take bigger stitches that are easily hidden beneath the fur.

I finished one eyebrow and glanced at my watch. It had taken me nearly three hours to cut the mask off the mold, cut the eye and mouth openings, sew on the eyelashes and one eyebrow. I was exhausted and decided to call it a day.

Word was getting around that I was learning how to make masks. The next morning I was up at the museum when Darryl Hugo, a former village youth tour guide who had graduated to his own tourist escorting business, appeared with a couple of tourists in tow. “Here’s someone who might know,” he announced. “She’s been studying and making masks.” I knew the question before they asked it; it was one any ethnographer would want

<sup>2</sup>Many factors drive the market for masks. Consumers want masks that look like “traditional” Eskimos, but masks with animal ears, hooves, or paws (used to simulate hair or beards) are also popular. Male masks outsell female masks, and mask makers themselves emphasize the importance of sewing, rather than gluing, facial features as a mark of quality. Because the masks are made repeatedly on the same molds, there is an inherent conservatism to them.

the answer to as well. So straightforward; yet so complex and difficult to answer. “How long does it take to make one of these masks?” I tallied up the time, not counting the day the masks had dried on their molds, nor securing the caribou: 2 1/2 hours of scraping, nearly 3 hours for soaking and tacking to the mold, 3 hours of sewing so far and my little lady was still bald, minus an eyebrow and a fur ruff. Now I know why informants hate these how long and how many questions. “It seems like forever,” I answered, “and I’m still not done.”

My time was running out; I was due to leave in a couple of days. Hopefully in another long dedicated afternoon I could finish my mask. I was getting to be a fixture in the Ahgook household. The following afternoon Lela’s son Chuck came into the house brandishing the wrenches he was using to dismantle his Argo<sup>3</sup> engine. He spied me sitting on the couch, mask in hand. “You gonna learn how to repair Argos next?” he asked.

I was down to the hair and the ruff. I had a choice for the former—the long thick white throat hair of the bull caribou or a commercially tanned gray mouton sheep hair of similar length. My bandaged left hand already had two puncture wounds from trying to push the needle through tough skin and I knew how thick-skinned fall bull caribou were. I wimped and settled for the mouton. “People are hardly getting the big bulls with that long hair,” Lela noted. “You have to get them in late October and younger people don’t like to get them because the meat smells bad then. We used to feed it to dogs.” I was amazed to discover that it takes only the smallest patch of skin to make the hair on a woman mask. I stitched the square inch patch all the way around, as I was instructed, parted the hair in the middle, tacked it at the sides, and finished it in two tiny braids.

“Whatever you have for ruff is fine with me,” I told Lela. She handed me the end of a wolf tail, thick and round with very tough skin. It’s the worst piece to use. I wrinkled my nose in disapproval. She laughed and picked up a wolf skin and began cutting a 1/2" thick long piece for the ruff. She started it for me at top of the mask, anchoring it with finer artificial sinew than that which we had used to sew the skins to the molds. Now the sewing felt familiar. I’d sewn ruffs on parkas before, though not on anything as thick as the face of this mask. Only later, when questioned by a reader of this essay, did I realize that the direction in which I pulled the thread as I made overcast stitches (away from myself) was opposite that of my teacher. Attaching the ruff went fairly quickly. A



Figure 7: The author’s mask

diagonal cut to each end so the pieces met flush below the chin and I was almost done. It seemed fitting that the finishing touch was chewing the ruff skin all around so it would lie flat. Then student and very patient teacher posed, with the finished lady, for photos.

Word spread that I had made a credible mask (Figure 7). Ada Lincoln, a veteran mask maker who debated for three years over the face she would create on one oversize mask, confided to Sarah McConnell, the summer tour company coordinator, “You don’t think she’s going to start making and selling masks, do you?” Not a chance, Ada. I’ve gone back to writing about them.

And, since that summer I’ve been thinking about what it means to make them. In 1964, 36 out of the 110 people in Anaktuvuk Pass made masks. Today there are 16 or 17 or 18 (depending on your criteria for mask maker) out of a population of 310, most of whom were making masks in 1964. Making masks is about money and always has been. Masks pay fuel oil and electric bills; they buy groceries and pay for trips to town. In boom times,

<sup>3</sup>Argo is the brand name of a 6-8 wheeled all terrain vehicle used for summertime travel on the tundra.



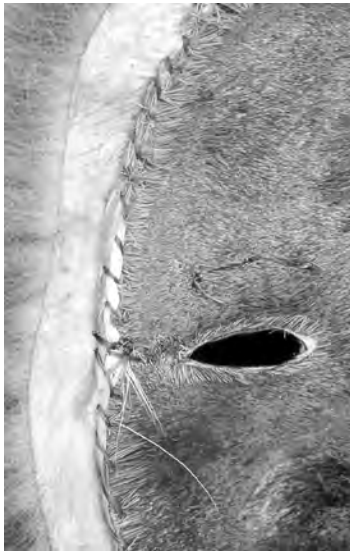


Figure 8a: Interior mask detail. Note shaving around eye. Photo by James Barker

even in remote Anaktuvuk Pass, there are other jobs; but in a downturned economy, like now, mask making provides needed cash and credit.

It is the caribou that will ultimately decide the fate of this craft. Masks aren't the only use for caribou skins today; winter boots, fancy boots, rifle cases, mattresses for camping are others. But it's the caribou as food that is the bellwether for all the uses

of caribou skins. Throughout the years of dramatic changes for the Nunamiut, from settled life to flush toilets to the Internet, the caribou has been a dietary mainstay. Just like Mary Douglas (1975) claimed in her article, "Deciphering a Meal," you need "meat" to make a meal, and "meat" here has always meant caribou. But how far into the future? "This new generation of kids," Lela groused, "thinks caribou is not food."

Regardless of the economic significance of masks, making them is also about remembered activities. Making masks is about using an ulu, that most essential tool, that extension of a woman's very arm. In addition to cutting skins and de-hairing them, making masks is about the skills honed on cutting meat for drying and chopping marrow bones. It's about dozens of movements learned with scrapers, needles, and thimbles practiced over a lifetime.

The familiar rhythms of skin sewing surely carry memories, just as the mask molds remind their owners of the people who made them, the occasions when they were acquired, and the times they've been put to use. I think of Lela's statement, "My favorite time to work on masks is when we go camping" and her remark made a few days later, "If I die while I'm camping, that's OK. Take me while I'm camping!" Skin sewing and camping, two joined pleasures in one woman's life.

And for the student of material culture? Much of the significance is in the details.<sup>4</sup> Like the precision move-

ment of fingers, needle, and thimble that successfully pierces tough caribou skin. Like the use of sinew and artificial sinew and the different feeling of each. Like the economy of raw materials—that little patch of fur that becomes the hair on a woman mask, that little patch whose size you wouldn't know just by inspecting the mask. Or the delicate shaving of hair on the inside of the mask



Figure 8b: Inside of mask. Note shaved area around eyes and mouth. Photo by James Barker

around the eyes and mouth that might otherwise go unnoticed (Figures 8a and 8b). Surely, you argue, some of these details would be revealed by simply watching others make masks. True enough.

But there is also the experience. Sewing is both a social activity and a social leveler. The professor morphs into the inept, struggling student, the native artist into the confident and caring teacher. There's something special about the learning environment too:

<sup>4</sup>There are several detailed accounts of Inuit skin working and sewing, most recently Issenman (1997), which contains an extensive bibliography, and Oakes and Riewe (1995).

A living room in Anaktuvuk Pass: Jerry Lee Lewis' biography, "Great Balls of Fire" plays on A&E on the big screen TV. Lela's cheery infant grandson is handed round from lap to lap. Sourdough pancakes and coffee provide a welcome break from work. An afternoon passes in conversation and laughter, in the easy companionship of two women with their sewing.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I'm especially grateful to Lela Ahgook without whose patient teaching I could not have "made it." Inge-Lise Jensen sent me wonderful photographs of her first and second graders and the paper plate masks they made. Grant Spearman, Molly Lee, and members of my local writing group provided comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.



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