

ANS 401 Knowledge of Native Elders  
Elder-In-Residence: Isa Sovalik  
November 25, 1986 by Joe Avugiak

At the start of the class period Isa talked about the preparation of a bleached seal skin.

To prepare a seal skin we must have a pot of boiling water. First you take a new skin from the seal and prepare it. Before you place the skin into the pot of boiling water, you remove the excess oil and blood from the seal's fur and dip it into the hot water. Once you place the skin in the water you must keep on turning it round and round so that the edges won't curl in. This is done by using your hands and if the water gets too hot for your hands you must remove the skin and shake it out. You must do this until the seal's fur is easy to remove. Once the fur can be easily removed, you'll need to hang the skin onto a nail and remove the excess juice and the fur with an ulu. After the fur is removed, you take the skin and stretch it out on the snow. A question that was asked is whether or not the skin can be ruined if you place it into the hot water. Isa said that if you keep on turning the skin you won't ruin it, but if you let it sit, then the skin can be cooked. After the skin is all prepared it can be used for boot bottoms, boot tops, and straps. This skin can also be dyed into such colors as red, blue, and green. Isa said that the dyed skin can be used for decorating boots such as for the body of the boot and for the sole bottoms.

Dyes can be bought from stores or you can use a special dye called Nunangiak 'alder bark'. Nunangiak is reddish in color and its use involves another preparation of the skin. This special dye

doesn't grow in Barrow, but people that live along the river near Nuiqsut usually have it.

When you prepare a seal skin using nunangiak you must let the skin sit for a while until the skin gets fermented or a little bit rotten so that the hair can be easily removed. After the skin is prepared you sew the skin with the fur side inside. Nunangiak can be prepared by first placing it into boiling water. After the dyed water cools down you put it on the skin and let it sit overnight. Once the skin is dyed you than sew the edges together. This process allows the dye to penetrate into the skin. Nunangiak can be placed on the skin by using hands and than let it dry.

Names of boots that you can make with hairless skin are called, iqaqziik (waterproof boots) ipialik (waterproof hip boots).

In order to make the waterproof boots you first have to dry the skin and than prepare another kind of skin that can be used for the body of the boot. The preparation of waterproof boots involves the following steps,


- 1.) First take the seal skin and dry it,
- 2.) remove the hair from the skin by using ash from the fire and apply it onto the fur,
- 3.) than remove the fur by using metal rifle shells, (these metal shells are used as scrapers)
- 4.) after all the hair is removed from one side than you turn the skin over and remove all the excess fat on the other side,
- 5.) the last step is to rub the skin together to make it soft.


During spring whaling, men use mukluks that are made with the fur inside. These mukluks have a name which means that you can't take the skin and turn the skin with the fur side outside.

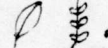
In order to make waterproof boots you have to pay attention to the condition of the skin. The skin should not have scratches or holes in it. Ulitchuilag is another seal skin boot that requires softening. Isa than told the class that the boots she talked about all require different stitches and a lot of work.

Bleached seal skin is used for soles, straps, and for the tops of the boots. the skin that you prepare by fermentation is used for the body of the boot. Bleached skin isn't used for soles on winter boots, but can be used for top trimmings on these types of boots. The waterproof boots are sewed by using special sinew from certain animals. Isa said that she doesn't make waterproof boots anymore, but in preparation of other types of boots, she uses thread that is store bought. This special sinew comes from the back of the baluga whale and from caribou legs. Isa said that caribou sinew is braided. Sinew from baluga can be used in sewing anything, and sinew from the caribou is used for waterproof boots. Caribou sinew comes from the legs of the caribou.

Question that was asked and discussed during class was, "what are some of the Arctic plants and their uses?"

Quagaq; green leaves that are shaped ,

Qungulliq; watercress with a long stem , these grow alongside the water.

Ippit; green plants with long reddish stem, .

"Isa commented that alot of plants don't grow in Barrow". Quagaq leaves are preserved in seal oil and can be eaten. Qungulliq can be eaten cooked or uncooked, but the reddish stem can be cooked by itself and made into juice. The leaves of qungulliq can be cooked too. Ippit plants can be eaten cooked or uncooked. Question that was asked, "Are any of the above plants used for medicine?" Isa said, "that she doesn't know". All of these plants aren't eaten every day but are eaten when they are available. Quagaq and qungulliq can be picked before the stems get hard. Another question that was asked "are there a variety of plants that grow in Barrow?" Isa said that the area she grew up in hardly has any plants.

After a caribou is caught the stomach contents can be eaten. Caribou stomach contents require fermentation which means that you have to let them sit for awhile before you prepare them. Caribou contents are fermented only during the winter. Stomach contents which are called nigukkaq are fermented. Caribou meat that is fermented is called piguraq.

Isa said that caribou eat from the ground and therefore whatever the caribou eat can be in the stomach. For this reason the stomach contents have to be prepared for food using the above method that we discussed. Nigukkaq is eaten frozen with seal oil. This method shows us that when people kill animals for food, they don't waste any parts of the animal.

Another question that was discussed during class was, "what are some of the ways that young children are taught to do sewing at home?" "Were they taught by their mothers or grandmothers?" Isa said that since her mother spent most of her days cleaning the house, she used

to go to her aunt's house because she was a good skin sewer. At her aunt's house, she used to like looking into her aunt's sewing basket. Her aunt would also rub her hands on Isa's hands so that Isa would become a good skin sewer like her. Isa's aunt would massage her (Isa's) hands and tell her that she would do good things like her. "Isa thinks that this became true". Isa also said that her aunt didn't exactly show her how to sew, but she started sewing on her own and found out she enjoyed it. When Isa was a little girl, Mrs. Greist, a wife of a doctor, used to have some of the girls do embroidery sewing. Isa said that the head nurse who worked at the hospital taught her and the other girls how to sew.

One time Isa and her two other sisters joined a sewing group and entered a contest. Isa said that she took first place in this contest, her older sister came second, and the oldest came in third. One student asked, "What were you sewing?", and she replied, "we were sewing with fabric making a bedspread."

Isa told the class that she learned how to sew skins by watching.

When Isa was a little girl her parents shared their house with another family. Although her mother used to prepare skins for sewing, she didn't sew because she kept herself busy cleaning the house most of the time.