

Guts, Intestines — Qilut

AANAQA ISUWIM QILUNEK KENIRLLIA. – MY MOTHER COOKED SEAL GUTS.



Photo: Elders work with seal gut. Dig Afognak Program, Afognak Island.

In addition to food and oil, Kodiak's mammals provided Alutiiq people with gut: a flexible, durable, waterproof material derived from the intestines of bears and sea mammals. Gut was sewn into a variety of bags, caps, and hooded jackets: the Gortex rain gear of the past. Known today by the Russian term kamleika, these lightweight jackets were an essential part of a hunter's tool kit. They kept him dry, providing protection from hypothermia in Kodiak's wet, windy environment.

Each gut garment was individually tailored to fit its owner. Bear intestine, the widest and most supple source of gut, was the preferred material. After harvesting, lengths of gut were soaked in urine to remove fat. Then they were turned inside out, scraped clean, inflated, and hung to dry. The final step was to split the gut into wide swaths of material. These swaths were sewn into jackets with special waterproof stitches. Skin sewers folded a piece of ryegrass into each seam to absorb any water that seeped through the holes made by their needles. While stitching, they also decorated each garment with beads, feathers, pieces of hair, strips of dyed skin, and bird beaks.

Russian traders, who valued these lightweight, water-resistant jackets, commissioned Native women to produce garments styled after European capes. These prized items were a sign of high status. They were worn by Russian officers and given as gifts to visiting dignitaries.