

Skin, Hide — Amiq

ARHANEK AMIRTAALLRIIT, TAUMI-LLU ATKULILUTENG. – THEY USED TO SKIN SEA OTTERS AND THEN MAKE COATS OUT OF THEM.



Photo: Hunter and guide with a brown bear hide, Uyak Bay, ca. 1965. Nekeferoff Collection, AM670:96.

Across the Alutiiq world, animal hides were once essential material for clothing, bedding, and boats. Alutiiq people stitched cormorant and caribou skins into parkas, wrapped their families in plush bear hides for sleeping, and covered their kayaks with durable seal and sea lion hides. But beyond these practical uses, animal skins were also potent spiritual objects.

Each skin retained the essence of its animal owner and could transfer that essence to whoever possessed it. Through careful harvesting, processing, and sewing, people passed an animal's nature into garments made with its skin. A complete hide or a small tuft of fur were equally effective in this way. As such, skin parkas provided both physical and spiritual protection. They shielded people from the cold and wet while providing luck and enhancing skill. Skin clothes were animals transformed into helpers.

Legends illustrate the Alutiiq belief that people and animals are part of one fluid world that can be traversed with the help of skins. By putting on or taking off a skin people become animals and animals become people. In one legend, a poorly treated boy leaves his community by putting on an eagle skin and joining the eagle people in the sky. In another, a ptarmigan removes her feathered skin to reveal a beautiful, accomplished wife.