

## A Study on the Patchwork in the Costumes of the Arctic Regions

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### Abstract

The most distinctive feature of the costumes of the Arctic regions from Alaska to Siberia centering around the Bering Sea connecting Asia to North America, is that each tribe makes clothes adequate to the climate and their lifestyles with animal hides obtained from hunting in their habitation.

Furs or fish skins, the main materials for clothing, are characteristically cut into many pieces, and thus piece-joining patchwork is used to make or decorate garments. Patchwork is the technique that can create new designs with 3-dimensional and various combinations by modifying the simple materials, and also has the advantage of fitting the body without a certain cut line. Therefore, the patchwork found in the Arctic costumes may be developed from folk costume designs with limited materials like fur into new ones for modern or future costumes.

Key words : the arctic costumes, furs and fish skins, patchwork, material modification.

### 1. Introduction

The costumes of the Arctic regions ranging from Alaska to Siberia centering around the Bering Sea connecting Asia to North America (Fig. 1), are typically characterized by the representation of distinctive environmental features. Various tribes in these regions, which mostly belong to the treeless tundra climate zone, make environmentally friendly costumes adequate to the climate and their lifestyles with materials obtained from their habitation and by means of living.

Hunting was the most important means of living for both the maritime and interior groups, therefore, hunted animal skins were the main material for clothing according to their habitation. Such furs or fish skins are characteristi-

cally cut into many pieces in order to make clothes using various ways of cutting and delicate sewing. Thus a great deal of patchwork is used to join the pieces for construction or decoration.

Patchwork is a technique that started as an act of patching and developed into the act of at-



<Fig. 1> North Pacific Region.

「Crossroads of Continents」, p.3.

taching a fabric piece to mend torn or worn garments from the time when man started to make clothes using fabrics. The term 'patchwork', also called 'piecing', refers to the process of joining two or more pieces of fabric to make a bigger piece. In other words, patchwork can be defined as the mosaic of fabric pieces all joined together at the edge.

Patchwork again is divided into "mosaic patchwork" and "applique patchwork" : patchwork normally refers to mosaic patchwork, in which regular shaped pieces are patched together, while applique is to attach designed cut pieces to a foundation fabric. Mosaic patchwork also includes patchworks with various geometrical patterns, and those with uneven or irregular shapes of fabric joined together : the latter is called "crazy patchwork".

The origin of patchwork dates back to the primitive times when people joined pieces of animal skins to put around their body. Today patchwork, as a needle art technique, is widely used in North America. It is known to originate in Ancient Egypt and the Middle East, and was transmitted to Asia, Europe and America through the Eastern trade routes.<sup>1)</sup>

Animal hides have been used mainly to protect the body and to keep off the cold, although the time when man started to use them for clothing differs according to regions. Patchwork, started as a primitive method of patching material to protect the body, has now developed into one of the techniques to create 3-dimensional art works. Especially, it is expected to present creative structures deviating from existing ones, due to the advantage of the piece-joining method enabling a garment to fit the body shape without a certain cut line.

This thesis first examines patchwork through various texts and photographs from previous

studies and literature, and then, based on it, investigates animal skin patchworks found in the costumes of the Arctic regions.

## II. A Case Study of Patchwork found in the Arctic Costumes

### 1. The North Pacific Coastal Regions

The North Pacific coastal regions refer to the Sea of Okhotsk, the Bering Sea and the Gulf of Alaska. Native tribes in these areas moved to coastal areas by group and established maritime civilization that could be supplied with rich and stable resources.

Main tribes here include the Aleut in the Aleutian Chain, the Yupik Eskimo, the Koryak in Western Alaska, the Itelmen, the Chukchi, the Tlingit and the Haida.

The Aleut men's festive costume, especially worn based on family lines during the annual winter festival, is decorated with gut-on-gut appliques, and finished with embroidery covered with reindeer fur hair. Both men and women wear a long ankle-length straight shirt with a high collar and raglan sleeves. Kamleika, an outdoor garment made of sea mammal intestines (Fig. 2), is worn to protect the body from humidity. The hat and gutskin cape worn for Eastern Unangan rituals are simple: but floral ornaments accent the center of the gut applique on the hat, and dyed thin leather stripes are applied on the collar, cuffs and the hem of the gut skin cape.<sup>2)</sup>

The Koryak funeral coat is made of young reindeer skins, and decorated with dog fur, tassels made of dyed seal fur, patchworks done with seal fur and dog skin, and thread-hair embroidery.<sup>3)</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Suyoung, Jeong. *A Study on Fashion Design Applying the Method of Constructing Patchwork*. (Master's Thesis. Ewha Womans University, 2000) pp.3-4.

<sup>2</sup> W. William Fitzhugh, & Aron Crowell. *Crossroads of Continents*. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988) pp.56-57.

<sup>3</sup> Moon-Sook, Kim. 'A Study on the Characteristics of Costumes in the Arctic Regions on the Pacific Coast.' *Costume Culture Study*. 7(3).(1999), p.40.



〈Fig. 2〉 The Aleut Hunter's Costume.  
『Crossroads of Continents』, p.52.



〈Fig. 3〉 The Eskimo Dancers' Costume.  
『Crossroads of Continents』, p.43.

The Koryak bag, called 'the Koryak bird feet bag', which was found in Siberian Kamchatka in about 1950, consists of triangular pieces made of bird legs, deer fur and beads.<sup>4)</sup>

The Yupik Eskimo of the Tannuak region on Alaskan Nelson island makes the gut parka with seal intestines and threads. The parka is water-proof, as the intestines were swelled out and dried, cut vertically, and joined together in special basting.<sup>5)</sup>

The dancers' costume (Fig. 3) of the Bering Sea Eskimo is a luxurious festive parka made by the way of connecting pictures of the hole-boring squirrel, bear, wolf and mink. U-shaped flap shown on the parka is the symbol of female.

The pictures took by Smithsonian naturalist Edward W. Nelson, who stayed in the Yukon River regions for a long period of time, show the Fort Yukon Indian wearing the splendidly decorated garment, which unlike those of other

eskimos in the regions, has appliques without beads around the neckline.<sup>6)</sup>

## 2. Siberian Regions

Siberian Amur river, running between northern Russia and southern China, served as a cultural highway along which peoples moved, as well as the main route of communications connecting the Asian interior, the north pole and the North Pacific coastland.

In Eastern Siberia, as in Alaska on of the Pacific, river-and-sea hunting and fishing started to become specialized. The economy based on sea mammal hunting and sea food gathering became stabler than that of continental hunting, and thus the people chose to settle naturally with the growing population.

One of the most dramatic developments of the prehistoric age in the North Pacific was the establishment of Eskimo civilization. It was achieved by cultural exchanges with the advanced

<sup>4</sup> Moon-Sook Kim. 'A Study on the Homogeneousness in Costumes of the Bering Sea Coastal Regions'. *Costume Culture Study*. 5(4)(1997), p.41.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>6</sup> Fitzhugh, W. William. & Crowell, Aron. *Ibid.* p.42, p.66.

regional civilization in Siberia and the Aleutian Chain on the Pacific coast through the Bering Sea,<sup>7)</sup> called the Land Bridge, the land corridor of the vast tundra frozen during the glacial age. As a result, civilization similar to that of the Eskimos appeared in the regions of Chukotka and Kamchatka as well.<sup>8)</sup>

Nanai women's fish skin coat of the Amur river region is made of salmon skin, which clearly reflects Chinese influence in the embroidery and cut at the back. The decorations randomly arranged on the coat surface are applied with dyed salmon skin. A close look at the garment shows that seams exist only in the gaps of separate skin pieces. It is so elaborate and beautiful that it may be considered a big achievement of the Amur peoples. The applique patterns, the design guideline for the Amur seamstress, are made of paper or birch bark, and are used to decorate the fish skin coat or other garments.<sup>9)</sup>

The back of the Nanai wedding gown (Fig. 4) consists of 4 panels, each adorned with a symbol: the bird, fish, dragon, and the tree of life. The bodice consisting of four large panels, the hat, and the cape show various patchworks and decorations.

The boots made of reindeer skin and silk are the example of strong relations of the Amur peoples with China.<sup>10)</sup>

The garments of the Yakut shamans are exhibited in the Siberian Hall, the Kyunghee University Central Museum, and the Danish Folk Museum. On the chest of the garments are



〈Fig. 4〉 The Nanai Wedding Gown.  
『Spirit of Siberia』, p.168.

attached animal carvings such as ducks and fish, which symbolize cosmic flight.<sup>11)</sup>

The women of the traditional Yakut region wear much decorated long coats and hats for a festival: the coat consists of black, green and red horizontal panels, and a heart-shaped pattern is engraved on the metal pendant attached to the coat and the wide metal necklace.<sup>12)</sup>

The Yukagir costume includes those with ancestral shamanic figures attached on the left side, the design of the spinal column on the back, and crosses designed of birds applied on the right side.<sup>13)</sup>

The Nenets festive costume (Fig. 5) is made

<sup>7</sup> The Cook Inlet Historical Society. *The Alaska Gallery at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art*. Anchorage.(1992) p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Moon-Sook Kim, "A Study on the Homogeneousness in Costumes of the Bering Sea Coastal Regions". *Costume Culture Study*. 5(4).(1997), pp.33-35.

<sup>9</sup> Moon-Sook Kim, "A Study on the Characteristics of Costumes in the Arctic regions on the Pacific Coast", *Costume Culture Study*. 7(3).(1999), pp.41-42.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Okes & Rick Riewe. *Spirit of Siberia*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.(1998). p.168, p.177.

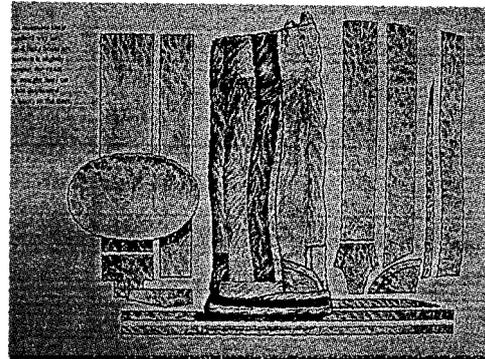
<sup>11</sup> Geumju Bak, *A Study on the Shamanism and Shamanic Costume in Siberia*. (Doctoral thesis. Kyunghee University). p55.

<sup>12</sup> Jill Okes & Rick Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia*. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998) p.113.

<sup>13</sup> Bak, Geumju, *Ibid.*, p.56.



(Fig. 5) The Nenets Festive Costume.  
 『Spirit of Siberia』, p.30.



(Fig. 6) The Ngeanasan Women's Boots  
 『Spirit of Siberia』, p.69.

of the best reindeer skin: this traditional coat is patched with several horizontal panels of zigzag designs and vivid colored pieces of animal skin in rows.

The Nenets wear boots mainly made of reindeer-leg-hides, which are decorated with furpieces of light or dark colors, and the seams are adorned with red, yellow and green fabrics. Women's boots have triangular decorations at the lower shin, while those for men are decorated with a horizontal band just below the knee.

Parkas and shoes of the Khanty, Mansi, Selkup and Ket are decorated with hair embroidery of geometrical designs, beads, paintings, and hide-piece patchworks. The patterns are stitched in such a way that different colors meet by turns using light and dark colored hides.

The traditional boots of these regions are usually painted using a pointed tool with the front decorated with triangular insets. The triangular inset for women's boots and the horizontal band for men's are used throughout these regions.

Hides with white hair is preferred in men's costume among the Ngeanasans and Enets, which is arranged to harmonize with black fur. For women's knee high boots, a long thin dark fur-strip is used as the side panel of the leg, and a small piece is used at the heel as well



(Fig. 7) Even Women' Clothing.  
 『Crossroads of Continents』, p.36.

(Fig. 6).<sup>14)</sup>

Women's garments (Fig. 7) of the Evens and Evenkis are traditional costume worn by both men and women: the coat has the open front without a collar worn together with boots, leggings made of big deer-hides, a hat and gloves. It is decorated with beads imported from Venice and traditionally dyed reindeer and deer hair at the hem, and has the breast piece.

<sup>14</sup> Jill Okes & Rick Riewe. *Spirit of Siberia*. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998) p.30, p.40, pp.50-51, p.60, pp.65-68.

The Even aprons are very similar to those of Europe in cutting or functions. The hem made of dyed reindeer hides and delicate geometrical design are woven out of dark hide-strings made of torn undyed hides. The appearance of the Even shamans is similar to that of the Evenks: the coat is made of dark-colored suede on the left side, and light, on the right, which symbolizes that shamans belong to the two worlds.

The Evenki winter boots are adorned with wing-shaped bead appliques, while summer ones are added with decorative embroidered panels.

The Chukchis' small pouch (Fig. 8) made of seal skin has a chevron design: dark and light colored hide panels are joined by turns with the hem adorned with applique stings, triangular motifs, and brown-green panels.

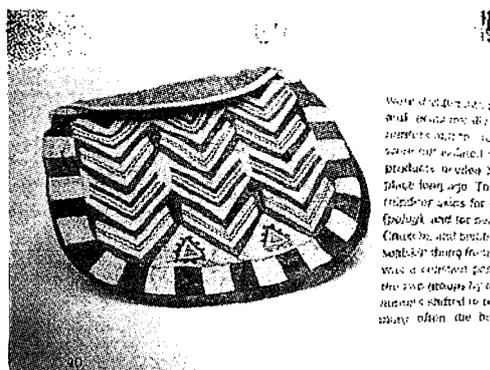
The embroidered summer boots are made of water-proof seal skin with whiskers, and the upper part consists of pieces of dyed and tanned reindeer leather and bleached seal hide.<sup>15)</sup>

### III. Patchwork Material and Method of the Arctic Costumes

#### 1. Material

It was the job of a seamstress to make the second skin for people with animal fur. Women believed that clothes had to be made by fine and perfect sewing skills to bring lucks to their hunting men.

Seamstresses may participate in professional hunting in order to harmonize the correlation between man and animals, and transfer man's relation with animals to the costume they make. Such examples are found in iconographical animal appliques on the Northwest Coast blankets and garments, or sometimes combi suits made of a whole black bear skin. The combi suits worn by the Chugach Eskimo on rainy days consist of the hood made of the black bear's head-skin, sleeves and gloves, and trou-



Some of water-proof and water-resistant materials were used to make out clothing products in the past long ago. The traditional ones for a hood and for the coat, and boots made of seal skin were a constant part of the old clothes for the people who lived in the mountains when the sea

〈Fig. 8〉 The Chukchis' Small Pouch

「Crossroads of Continents」, p.40.

sers and boots made of the leg hides.

In Alaska and Siberia, leg hides of the deer or reindeer are used to make leggings and boots, and the Chukchis make leggings and the arm of the parka with bear-leg-hides. Also Siberian mittens are often made of reindeer-leg-hides or bear feet. The hair band for protecting the hood and the ears is usually made of the head part of the deer, dog, or wolf. Animal tails are usually used to express large U-shaped flaps as in Eskimo women's parka, or for patterns of the Yukaghir or Even coats. As described so far, animal identities of raw materials lead seamstresses to develop special cutting based on animal features they want to emphasize by inspiring their creativity rather than restricting their potential. In fact, all clothes are made of a few different types of hides and furs, therefore it may be great joy for them to skillfully give life to each shape and feature.

#### 2. Method

It is important to choose fabrics that are easy to treat, and have the same texture and degree of strength to make a general patchwork, in which interesting effects may be produced by embroidery. Patchwork is also used for edge trimming presenting the unique and decorative finish. Patchwork patterns vary so much accord-

<sup>15</sup> W. William Fitzhugh & Aron Crowell. *Crossroads of Continents*. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988) pp.36-37, p.247, pp.94-95, pp.40-41.

ing to the way of construction that it is difficult to list them all. Typical patterns may be classified as follows based on sewing techniques.

Firstly, "pieced patchwork" is the process of joining various shapes of blocks like hexagons, squares and triangles together to make the whole pattern, and has many different types.

Unlike pieced patchwork, in "applied patchwork", different or similar shapes of pieces are added to each other in a certain way or put together successively. It includes the patchwork, in which the effect of striped straight lines is produced using stripes, and "crazy patchwork" joining pieces of different sizes together.

"Seminole patchwork", known to originate from the Seminole Indians, focuses on making a continual pattern of stripes using pieces smaller than blocks. This pattern may be used to decorate patchwork edges or by constructing the whole pattern. The basic patterns of this patchwork are constructed in various shapes, which characteristically present the effect of a single stripe by connecting the patterns repeatedly.

Lastly, "pleated patchwork" is the technique by which textural effect can be added to a plane patchwork pattern, and is adequate to express the surface cubic effect using pleats and tucks.<sup>16)</sup>

The costume of the North Pacific is not the reproduction of animal figures as they are but the complicated and abstract expression of them. Dress patterns make complicated and delicate designs(Fig. 3) according to how different shapes and colors of hides, and forms and lengths of furs are joined together to restructure a beautiful animal figure. Various and contrasting types of hides accent the cutting and making of the garment aesthetically and symbolically. The emphasis on motifs gives possible symbolic meanings to clothes, and it is shown in those of the Aleuts, Southern Alaskan Eskimos, Koryaks, Athabaskans and Evens. The work of seam-

stresses in these cultures differs from those of the Tlingit or Amur seamstresses, since they not only cut clothes and add decorative elements to them but also pursue aesthetic aspects beyond the symbolic features of material.

Hides traditionally used by the Aleut and Southern Alaskan Eskimo seamstresses include small mammal and bird skins, and especially gut skins: the shapes are unclear when stitched and can be cut into any pattern. The dress patterns of these regions, unlike those using large skin pieces, make garments showing aesthetic purposes based on small pieces.

In these garments, hides are stitched on the square chest panel in a horizontal straight line, and the front and back of the garment are similar except for the collar. Although the cutting is simple in a straight line, the decoration is very elaborate. It shows rhythmical repetition, and small-scaled repetitive patterns presented by mixed materials themselves.

The ground squirrel's brindled skin, fish skin's scaled patterns, purplish cormorant skin, and gut skin are normally used to make the intersecting pattern of golden and silver colors (Fig. 1). The horizontal design is shown as the horizontal band in the Aleut parka and body, which seems to have magical functions as well as practical ones.

The Koryak seamstresses in Eastern Siberia gained reputation in the production of fur mosaic, slit embroidery, and the lower hem of a large piece added to the outer garment. Extra fabric is always added to the coats of the Koryaks and Chukchis at the lower hem even though they are not decorated.

Basically the costumes of the Arctic regions use mosaic patchworks of regular or irregular shaped hide-panels along with applique patchworks(Fig. 4) for decorative effects. Among applique patchworks are those with standardized and magical meanings.<sup>17)</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Bori Yu. *Fashion Design Applying Traditional Patchwork Patterns of the West*. (Master's Thesis. Ewha Womans University, 1992), pp.11-14.

<sup>17</sup> W. William Fitzhugh & Aron Crowell. *Crossroads of Continents*. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), pp.210-223.

As for the patchwork method, "pieced patchwork" refers to making the whole pattern by joining regular-shaped blocks together: the Koryak bird feet bag consisting of triangular pieces, the Nenets zigzag design (Fig. 5), and the Chukchi small pouch (Fig. 8) made of dark and light colored chevrons. "Applied patchwork" is also used in various ways to connect different or similar shaped pieces successively. Kamleika (Fig. 2) of the Aleuts has the straight striped effect with the gut skin; the Eskimo dancer costume and women's boots (Fig. 3, 6) of the Nnganasans are examples of "crazy patchwork" joining hide pieces of different types and sizes.

#### IV. Conclusion

Hunting was the most important means of living for the maritime and interior tribes of the Arctic regions, and thus animal hides became the main material for clothing. Obtained furs or fish skins are elaborately cut by seamstresses, and as a result, a great deal of garments appeared to use patchworks.

Dress patterns produced by special cutting based on animal features make delicate designs (Fig. 2) according to how different shapes and colors of hides, and forms and lengths of furs are joined together. Various and contrasting types of hides accent the cutting and making of the garment aesthetically and symbolically.

Patchwork is a new creative technique to make clothing that can generate material modification with the combination of various materials and 3-D structures deviating from plane and simple materials. It also has the advantage of fitting the body without a certain cut line. Therefore, this interesting technique can be applied to various modern or future costumes not limited to the designs found in folk costumes with defined materials like fur.

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