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A Nunamiut boy in a fur-trimmed parka holds a mask of caribou hide.

THOMAS J. ABERCROMBIE/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE





By **LESLIE HSU OH**

# *THE RIGHT MASK*

## **Finding Meaning in Anaktuvuk Pass**

**T**he shadow of our single-engine plane coasted north over a landscape that grew increasingly brown and bare. Serpentine rivers which once carved through a sea of trees near Fairbanks now ran naked beneath the sun. I craned my neck over the pilot's shoulders, impatient for mountains to surface. Believed to be 126 million years old, the Brooks Range spans 700 miles across northern Alaska and the Yukon Territory of Canada. Part of this range is protected within the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, which measures the same size as Switzerland and is inaccessible by trails or roads. Within this park I would find what I had been searching for: caribou skin mask makers in the village of Anaktuvuk Pass.

As gray gaunt peaks appeared, multiplying and lengthening until they seemed to tower above the plane, I finally smiled. I had been waiting since my mother died nearly 13 years ago for this moment. Soon, I could study carvings made by wind, water, temperature, and glaciers. Nothing fluttered or twitched in the tufts of dry tundra clinging to sharp surfaces. The pass opened into a valley glittering with blue pools and twisting ribbons of water. The plane made several passes over a cluster of buildings arranged neatly beside a fenced airstrip. Then the wheels gripped, clouding our windows with dust. →



**D**ESCENDED FROM A LONG line of artists, my mother and I collected masks because of the conversations they invoke long after the life of its creator. A mask continues to serve a purpose “not because it brings the past back to us but because it may help preserve our future,” according to the late Andrew Paukan of St. Mary’s. Elder Paul John of Tuksook Bay says his elders called masks *agayuliyaraq*, which means “way of making prayer.” I met his wife and son a few years ago at the Smithsonian’s Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland where, together with anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, they pulled out storage trays to examine the handiwork of their ancestors. “Ahh,” they exhaled together at each item. “Beautiful.” They recorded techniques that they learned and wanted to try at home.

My mother died before she could study the Athabaskan, Haida, Iñupiaq, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Sugpiaq, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Unangax̂, and Yup’ik masks at the Smithsonian’s Living Our Cultures exhibition at the Anchorage Museum. She would’ve been fascinated with how they were used for ceremonies, by shamans to summon and be possessed by an animal or nature spirit, to spy on distant places, foretell the future, and rescue or heal people. *In Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska*, a large mask found in a burial cave on Unga Island around 1869 has traces of red and green paint and a wooden grip in the back for someone to hold the mask with their teeth. It “may have been supplied to the dead for use in ceremonies during the afterlife.” A Yukon River



[TOP] A view of red bearberry foliage and mountains at the village of Anaktuvuk Pass in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve. [LEFT] Rhoda Ahgook stretches wet caribou skins over mask frames carved from spruce or balsam poplar in the likeness of a relative. [RIGHT] Jerry designed “The Spirit of Change” mask to heal not only the artist, but the beholder.

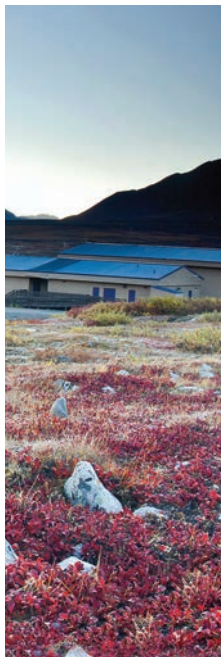
kegginaquq collected in 1878 represents a *tuunraq* or shaman’s helping spirit. “It has a semi-human face, wooden peg teeth, a blood-splattered mouth, and red-painted attachments, including two human legs...a wolf *tuunraq* was said to attack the source of disease inside a shaman’s patients, emerging with its mouth dripping in blood.” Collected in 1928, the Wild Man *giyema* still has vibrant blue paint on his chin and forehead which represent a woman’s facial tattoo. This type of mask is used in the Deg Hit’an region for the Stick Dance Ceremony, where “carved sticks representing the souls of animals were placed in the river to release the souls back into the wild, ensuring the animals return to be hunted again.”

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**R**HODA AHGOOK, 77 YEARS OLD AND THE COUSIN OF JUSTUS Mekiana, the oldest mask maker in Anaktuvuk Pass and the inventor of the process used today to make caribou skin masks, invited me to sit down at her dining table. Rhoda explained in Iñupiaq that she had lived in Anaktuvuk Pass since 1949. Prior to that, her family followed a nomadic lifestyle. She counted on her fingers 23 years of making masks.

(THIS PAGE) TOP: CARL JOHNSON/ALASKASTOCK; ALL OTHER IMAGES: LESLIE HSU OH





She demonstrated how to clean a caribou skin with an ulu knife, dye a skin with a coffee or tea, and stretch wet skins upon mask frames carved from spruce or balsam poplar in the likeness of a relative.

In the summer, it takes only a day for the skin to dry. The mask maker trims the edges of the dried skin with a pocketknife and cuts holes for the eyes and mouth. Apart from calfskin eyelashes, the rest of the materials come from animals the community harvests. Caribou fur is used for the eyebrows and hair. Wolf, fox, grizzly bear, black bear, and wolverine fur is used for the ruffs.

Then, Rhoda invited me to return to Anaktuvuk Pass when I had more time so she could teach me how to make a mask. *Oh, Mom you would be so jealous!* We embraced. I bought a mask from Rhoda and asked her what it meant. Rhoda looked confused. I tried again, “Why did you make this mask?”

“For money. To buy food, gas.” Rhoda explained that her husband, Bob Ahgook, and Zacherius Hugo, invented the first caribou skin mask for a dance routine performed during Christmas celebrations in 1951. Hugo had visited Fairbanks a few months earlier and got the idea from rubber Halloween masks. Rhoda insisted that there was no traditional meaning behind the masks.

Perhaps, that’s why these masks are rarely seen in museums.

This discovery felt as uncomfortable as swallowing a bone. I wasn’t completely sure why until years later, when Jerry Lieb, Jr., a Yup’ik Iñupiaq artist, attended the art show at the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention. Near his elbow, he had displayed a wooden mask mimicking his teddy-bear-like features. He shaded half the mask with soot and inlaid a single teardrop of turquoise. Jerry designed “The Spirit of Change” to heal not only the artist, but also the beholder. “The mask shows a dark side that I had, in my case alcoholism, when I acted out to fulfill my own needs without regard to the people I hurt. But to you, it could represent something that you suffer from or grieve about.”

On the top of the mask, he inserted five ivory feathers, representing respect for family, land, water, the creator and food. He traced the black etchings on the feathers that jutted out from the darkened portion of the mask, “These lines mean that even though I respected these five values, I was weak.”

He fed me exactly what I had hoped to find in Anaktuvuk Pass. At the end of that day, I watched an elderly woman with tears in her eyes purchase “The Spirit of Change.” I tried to dispel the regret that I could only afford the “fake” masks (the caribou skin masks which are priced under \$200) but not the “real” ones (Jerry’s mask priced at thousands of dollars). I saw a fear in the buyer’s eyes reflected in my own: accusations of “cultural appropriation” for identifying with

traditions we were not born from—a fear so debilitating that I continue to isolate myself as an “outsider” even though I have been adopted into several Native families and loved as a sister and daughter.

I simply wanted to ground my children in a



Trimmed in beaver and wolf fur, this caribou skin mask was made by Molly Ahgook before she passed away from cancer.

traditional knowledge that I respected, in case I did not live long enough to impart it to them. The hospital in Anchorage that delivered my children and the cabin in which I raised them in Eagle River might disappear one day, but at least when my daughter turned seven, she made a mask in school and glued on five feathers, proudly telling her friends what they represented and that she was born in Alaska.

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**I**N THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAIN Soahpak, whose name means “watch what you’re doing because the mountain is watching,” I wandered out of Anaktuvuk Pass onto the tundra. A sliver of water appeared just beyond the last man-made structure. As I closed the distance, the pool grew until my feet touched the edges of a vast lake. From where I stood, my reflection was oddly absent. The mountains appeared precisely reversed on the smooth glass-like surface. I couldn’t decide whether the reflection was more authentic than the reflected. I stayed until the clouds came alive in the water. They morphed into masks I had seen on sale in the grocery store, faces of the people I saw walking in the village. A mouth yawned. A set of eyes winked. A rim of fur bristled.

Before leaving Anaktuvuk Pass, I collected a mask made by Justus and one by Rhonda’s sister Molly, a mommy and baby face squeezed side-by-side, trimmed in beaver and wolf fur. Both artists passed away shortly thereafter.

My daughter will sometimes ask me if the baby and mommy mask hanging on our wall represent us. I’ll nod even though I’ve always thought the masks more accurately portrayed my mother and me. My son would point to Justus’ mask with its trademark caribou bone buckteeth and say, “That’s Daddee.”

Then I’ll slip in a lesson about respecting family, land, water, the creator and food. I’ll show them what anthropologist Margaret Blackman said: “Each mask represents a caribou hunted, killed, skinned, and butchered somewhere on the Nunamiut landscape; a caribou eaten and shared; a caribou skin stretched and dried; a sun-bleached skin shaved of hair and cut into ovals to become Nunamiut faces. And it includes the knowing of where and when and how to do all these things.”

When I gaze into the mask’s hollow eyes, I can imagine myself napping on the tundra. In the cool shade of Soahpak, I rest my weary limbs, dig my toes and fingers into the grass, and fill my lungs with the fragrance of berry bushes, dry and prickly on my back. 🐾