

About Masks: Conversations from Anaktuvuk Pass, Alaska

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Abstract

For 50 years the Nunamiut of Anaktuvuk Pass, Alaska have been making skin masks by a technique that they invented, casting wet caribou skins on wooden molds. For 50 years the Nunamiut have also been talking about their village's distinctive art. Speaking at the turn of the 21st century, Doris Hugo who has been making masks for 40 years, reflected on change, "You used to see those old ones are so neat. Today we are getting restless maybe; too fast sometimes maybe. I rush and rush sometimes, try to finish." This paper looks at Nunamiut conversations about masks—among themselves, with potential buyers, with the anthropologist. What do and don't they discuss and what do these conversations say about their relationship to their art and its meaning in their lives?

Keywords: tourist art, masks, Alaska, Nunamiut

Ruth Rulland, a short Nunamiut woman whose smile spreads across the entire width of her summer brown face, sat at her kitchen table, her glasses pushed up on her forehead, staring intently at an 8 x 10 color photo of a caribou skin mask. She glanced at the label in the lower left hand corner with the number 1 on it, then pulled her glasses down to peer intently at the mask. The cassette tape in my recorder wound round and round as Ruth thought for what seemed like an interminably long time about the photo. I looked nervously at my three-ring binder of photos. There were 49 more for her to look at. Finally, she cocked her head towards me, showing that smile. "Whose is it?" she asked.

That wasn't the response I was looking for when I designed this free-list photo experiment in 2004. I had put together a photo album of 8 x 10 color photos of 50 Anaktuvuk (and Anaktuvuk style but non-Nunamiut) skin masks. Included in my sample

were masks by current mask makers, older masks from museum collections, as well as those with particular features that I hoped would spark comment, such as masks in blackface, masks with caribou hooves for horns, masks bearing wolf ears and wolf snouts, masks rubbed with raw caribou liver, a mask whose hairstyle made its gender indeterminate, and so forth. “Gee, who did that? Doris Hugo, a prolific mask maker asked at my next interview, looking at photo #1 and running through a list of possibilities. “Elijah, no, Susie, no, Clyde, no. Who?”” With every mask the first thing they all wanted to know was: who made it. I had hoped that the photos would elicit a commentary on at least some of the very characteristics of the masks that had guided my selection of them. I wanted a conversation about their art, its rules and aesthetics. I should have known better.

For 50 years the people of this small arctic village in Alaska’s Brooks Range have made caribou skin masks of human faces cast on hand carved wooden molds. The masks are so characteristic of the place that a skin mask made on a mold by any Alaska native person is often labeled an Anaktuvuk mask. The masks are even more closely identified with the village of their origin because they look like the people (though not intentionally like anyone in particular), and because the Nunamiut chose the mask face as the logo for their village corporation. A similar mask face is etched in glass on the welcome sign to village’s Simon Paneak Memorial Museum, wherein the story of Anaktuvuk mask making is prominently exhibited.

Fifty years ago Justus Mekiana of Anaktuvuk Pass invented the process for making skin masks. “I have idea,” he said, “to make little money some way. I was thinking of it for long time too. I cut a little piece of a tree, spruce, and I start carving it like human, alright.” His first attempt at attaching a skin to his mold was a failure; he hadn’t carved the features deeply enough nor had he provided a satisfactory way to hold the skin to the mold at the eyes, nose and mouth. When he peeled his first mask off the mold it was virtually featureless. “The first one does not really look pretty,” he said. “Next one, second one, much better; third one is much better; fourth one is much better.” Justus is modest about the ingenuity of his efforts at mask making, but they led one social scientist 40 years ago to write an article for the journal *Science* on the psychology of innovation (ATAMIAN 1966).

The wooden molds or “frames” as the Anaktuvuk people call them, are as worthy of attention as the skin faces they yield. They are made from spruce or balsam poplar obtained miles south of treeless Anaktuvuk in the forested areas of the Brooks Range and they are carved in the restrained, minimal style characteristic of wooden masks from Alaska’s north coast. Unlike the latter, however, their backs are left flat because they are not used as masks. Many molds exhibit stylistic characteristics identify their makers. “This is Amo’s frame,” his niece who owns several of Amos Morry’s, explained, holding one up at

arm's length. "He always made his with big nose." "My dad's ..." she held up one made by John Morry, "always, always smiley."

The masks themselves are about the skin sewer's art, evident today not only on skin masks but in winter boots for hunting, fancy boots for dancing, rifle cases, and parka ruffs. On the masks, tiny even stitches made with sinew fasten eyelashes cut from a thin strip of commercial calfskin to the eye sockets. If done correctly, the stitches are nearly invisible. The hair, the beards on male masks, the eyebrows, and the fur parka ruff encircling the mask face are all hand sewn with the patience and skill required to pierce the tough, dense skin from a bull caribou neck with a needle.

I've been digging for that conversation with mask makers about their art for some years now. I've talked at length with most of the mask makers in Anaktuvuk Pass, several of whom have since died. Our recorded and transcribed conversations ranged over many topics, including securing and preparing caribou skins and furs, the various steps in making a mask, and the pleasures of skin sewing. I asked artists about how they market their art and their thoughts on the future of mask making. To better understand how the craft itself was done, four years ago I apprenticed myself to a mask maker and made a mask (BLACKMAN 2005).

Actually, there are quite a few conversations about Anaktuvuk masks. Some I directed in my interviews with artists, some are the artists' own off the record remarks. There's the artists' exchange with buyers of their art, and there's an ongoing conversation I have with myself about the significance of all this. Here I follow a few of these conversations and the questions they raise.

What I wanted from my photo interview experiment were the evaluative comments that mask makers are reluctant to make when directly asked. An off hand, "Clean skin, nice eyelashes or good hair would have made my day. I did get a few comments like: "Wow, just like a real person; nice work," but nothing more specific. The artists paid more attention to the fur ruffs, identifying the source—wolf, silver fox, red fox, wolverine, black bear, grizzly—and they noted if it were an unusual piece, like a wolf tail. Happily, each artist recognized her own work among the photographs, and more than one offered some helpful clues to individual style such whether the eyelashes were cut at the inner or outer corner. But mostly what I got, especially immediately, was some variation of "who made it?" At least, I told myself, there is recognition of the individual artist behind the work.

Anaktuvuk skin masks are a classic example of tourist art, though mask makers acknowledge that making them is hard work and takes patience. Artists say they enjoy making masks and they take pride in their creation. I knew there had to be good masks and bad.

The Nunamiut are generally reticent when it comes to evaluating each other's work, with the exception of *sotto voce* comments that so-and-so uses glue on his masks, or so-and-so has carelessly and unevenly scraped the skin used for a mask (a flaw that can be discerned when you backlight a mask). Careful preparation of the skin is commendable. Ruth Rulland notes, "I have to scrape and scrape. Nice. You gotta scrape nice if you want to sell your good mask. Scrape 'em good."

One discovers the aesthetics and the rules in the breach. When I attempted to make a mask in 2002 under the careful tutelage of Lela Ahgook, I learned about the norms for facial features. After removing a mask from the mold, one must cut the eye sockets and mouth from the mask with a sharp pocketknife. The eyes should be symmetrical and the size of the mouth balanced with the rest of the features. I made a female mask, and no sooner had I carefully cut the mouth than Lela scolded me, "What do you think you are doing? Making a man?" She convulsed with laughter: "The mouth is too big."

Rhoda Ahgook, now in her 70s, has been making masks about as long as anyone else. Rhoda provided what may be the most important clue to work considered well made, even authentic. "I sew 'em with sinew," she said emphatically, a detail so important that she writes in her scrawly handwriting on the homemade cardboard tags she attaches to her masks: "sewn with real sinew." Marie Paneak, a mask maker in her early 70s known for her whimsical mask faces which she calls "old-fashion," affirmed her use of the real thing too: "We use sinew for mask. Pretty good. Some people always use different kind of sinew alright, but I always use caribou sinew [which] is better." The "different kind of sinew" Marie refers to is waxed nylon thread marketed as "artificial sinew." It comes in large spools and a variety of colors (Anaktuvuk crafts people only use the "natural" color) and it is inexpensive (300 yards for \$9-\$13). Like the thing it imitates, its four-ply thread can be split into finer strands. In addition to being ready made, its labor saving advantage is that one can sew with a long strand, which is impossible with real sinew.

Not everyone believes a mask has to be sewn with sinew. Joshua Rulland, who took great care in making finely crafted masks, pointedly told me, "I don't use sinew on my masks. Sinew's a pain in the ass. You gotta get 'em [caribou] at certain times to get the right kind of sinew for your sewing. If not, you'll try to split it and it'll split into so many pieces." Joshua, now deceased, meticulously sewed his masks with heavy gauge cotton thread.

Glue is the antithesis of both hand sewing and sinew. The one thing that, for the Nunamiut, marks a lazy and careless artist who takes shortcuts, is using glue to apply the fur pieces to a mask. The advantage of doing so, of course, is that gluing is many times faster than sewing. Doris Hugo elaborated: “I don’t use glue so far. Some people using glue to eyelashes. [the eyelashes being the most difficult and time-consuming sewing] I always scared they might come off and my mask might come back.” Meaning, the owner might send it back to be properly put together. A mask should only come back if the ruff needs replacing because bugs have eaten the raw skin of the fur ruff.

Conversations about masks and mask making begin with caribou. Mask makers talk animatedly of caribou. To make a mask, villagers are fond of saying, first you have to get a caribou, or, at least the skin of one. It’s as simple, and as complex, as that. Of course, not just any caribou will do. Summer skins are thin and pockmarked with holes from *kumiks*—warble fly larvae—that have hatched beneath the animal’s skin and burrowed out along its back, leaving small holes in the skin. Such skins are unsuitable for masks, though if one has nothing else on hand one might try to use them. Susie Paneak had a ruse for her occasional use of summer skins. Pointing to the *kumik* holes on a mask, she giggled: “I tell *taniks* [white people] it’s pimples.” Cow skins are generally too thin to withstand the tugging and stretching required to snug wet skins to molds. The best skins for masks are the late fall bull skins taken during the rut when the meat is rank and virtually inedible. The skins are large—22 masks from a big bull one mask maker claimed—and their skins are thick. But time and change have complicated securing them. Lela Ahgook explained. “Nowadays, our young people won’t even skin a caribou that smells. And there are a lot of people think we’re wasting [if we leave the meat]. So they hardly get any of them bull caribous anymore, cause we don’t have dogs to feed them to. I try to let my son catch me one, but he won’t.”

Summer caribou skins may not be good for mask faces but parts of them are used for other features on the mask. For the eyebrows, Rhoda Ahgook advised, “Look for the short side on the leg. You find ‘em, you cut ‘em up from the side.” “Caribou short hair, summertimes, for *umiks*—beards—the same, from caribou leg.” “And hair for men,” she continued, “right around the feet. By the hoof.” The hairdo on a male mask can either come from a summer or winter caribou leg, depending on the look the artist wants. Summer hair is short and brown, winter hair longer and variegated with lots of white. The skins of caribou fetuses, with their soft, downy hair once served as the material for eyelashes on masks, but today it is easier to purchase by mail order black commercial calfskin. Nonetheless, in an Anaktuvuk mask, you can read the seasons of the caribou hunt. The flip side of the conversation about masks belongs to the retailers in the shops that carry Anaktuvuk masks and to the individual purchasers of them. In Anaktuvuk Pass the

Nunamiut Corp Store accepts masks in trade for grocery credit, and at various times they have posted criteria for masks, as in this posting from 1991:

- 1) clear ruff skin
- 2) no holes, marks, or scratches on the face
- 3) no glue on eyelashes
- 4) eyelashes must be sewn on
- 5) masks must be suitable for resale.

For more than 25 years when Anaktuvuk people traveled to Fairbanks, they sold their masks at Arctic Traveler Gallery on 2nd Avenue owned by Judy Robertson Divini who has since sold the shop. Judy enumerated her criteria for masks: “The quality is good, the stitches are close together, the face is made on a handmade wooden mold by people we know and it comes directly to us”. (BLACKMAN 2001).

In the early years of mask making, villagers marketed their masks through scientists, former schoolteachers, and other contacts living in Anchorage or Fairbanks who had spent time at the pass. Biologist Laurence Irving sold many masks for Simon and Susie Paneak. In a letter to Simon in 1970 Irving’s secretary, Helga Wakefield, made it clear that purchasers did not hesitate to express their preferences: “Please tell Susie that the people very much like the woman masks but do not like the big noses on the man masks. If she can send some especially pretty ones, I will try to get more money” (WAKEFIELD 1970a). The masks were sent, the customers satisfied, and Helga wrote for more: “Please send some more, again with small noses for the man mask. These last two were very well made” (WAKEFIELD 1970b). The criteria expressed by these examples offer no surprises — Handmade, known artists, no middleman, well made, and regularity of facial features seen as physically attractive. Of interest are the masks that violate that aesthetic. Wolf and fox ears, wolf snouts or paws made into beards, and caribou hooves adorn many masks. “They really go for hoofs and wolf claws,” Doris Hugo exclaimed. “They sell right away.” Marie Paneak caters to customers’/buyers’ attraction to the unconventional, the whimsical and the ugly with her crooked nosed wonky faces and her masks accented with stark white fur. One recent mask of hers I have only heard about bears the Federal Aviation Administration’s designation for Anaktuvuk Pass, AKP, beaded above one eye.

When Anaktuvuk people sell their work at venues like the Alaska Federation of Natives Native Art Fair or the University of Alaska Festival of Native arts in Fairbanks, they are asked the same questions, year in and year out. What do the masks mean, are they used in dances, what are they made of? The last is probably the most frequent query.

Sometimes the question is more focused with shoppers venturing their own guesses: “The ruff, it is wolf?” “No, arctic fox.”

At the 2005 Native Art Fair in Fairbanks, I asked three mask makers with whom I spent long hours at their sale table, if they might like to have an information sheet about masks to provide to prospective buyers of their art. Yes, they assured me. And what should be in it, I asked. What the masks are made of, and how they are made. That the mask is an Anaktuvuk, a Nunamiut, creation. The mask’s origin, as well.

The very first masks were two hand sewn ones made by two village men for the Christmas dances, used once and later sold. I wrote up their suggestions, adding a couple of sentences on mask care for those who take their purchases to areas beyond the arctic where insects will feed on the raw skins. My college’s graphic design department prepared a handsome one-page flyer with five thumbnail photos of Anaktuvuk masks (all of them by deceased artists so as not to favor any living one). The flyer was completed just in time for me to hand deliver copies to the artists in September of 2006.

The mask/money connection was one of the most prominent themes to emerge from my discussions with artists, and one that, at gut level, I find disconcerting, my 30+ years of anthropological training to the contrary. The close link between masks and money in Nunamiut thinking is hardly surprising, as making a little bit of money was, after all, what got Justus Mekiana started in an era when cash was in very short supply.

On a summer evening in 2002, tape recorder and notebook at the ready, I hunkered down in the yard outside Doris Hugo’s house. Doris, who is Justus Mekiana’s sister, has been making masks since the 1960s. Doris sat beside me, in her colorful calico *attigiluq*, on a big plywood board, feet stretched straight out in front of her in the customary posture of older Nunamiut who grew up without furniture. I watched and recorded her at work on masks while Fairbanks photographer Jim Barker photographed her releasing dried skins from their molds and dyeing new ones to replace them. She talked as she dipped an oval piece of skin, destined to become a mask, in the solution of Lipton tea that would give it its Eskimo complexion. A granddaughter and her cousin rode up on their bikes. “You making masks,” Violet, the cousin, inquired. “Only way to make money,” Doris replied. “Lots of work. Lots of money, but lots of work.”

Doris’s younger sister, Rachel, the instructor in the bilingual/bicultural program at the Nunamiut School, offered this straightforward comment when I interviewed her: “When I think about masks,” she laughed, “I think about money.” Mask making is even weighed against the pecuniary remuneration of oral history interviewing. In Anaktuvuk and

other North Slope villages, it is customary to pay the going cultural resource expert wage of \$20-25/hour for interviews. Lela Ahgook, my mask making instructor and good friend, once told me in her no-holds-barred manner, "I gotta get money for my Argo [an all terrain vehicle], make masks. \$20 for interview is not much money. I make more making masks."

Anaktuvuk masks are, and have always been, artifacts for the market. The Nunamiut had no tradition of mask making or wearing prior to the 1950s. The skin masks they made beginning in 1956 provided a welcome entrée into a cash economy; by the late 1960s most of villagers' income came from the sale of masks. Ada Lincoln, who has been making masks for many years, recalled their economic impact in the mid 1970s. "There was no job yet when we moved back here from Barrow and that's how they were making their living, with the masks. Buy skidoos, and those gas washers. They were buying everything with the masks. Buying freezers and everything. Groceries from Fairbanks."

One can't ignore the local trickle-down economics of mask sales. One summer day in 2002, having just purchased a mask from a village woman, I followed her out of her home as she went to cash my check at the Village Corporation Headquarters. One of her grandsons, playing nearby on the school playground, spied her, immediately figuring out her mission. "Grandma," he yelled, "You got money for camp?" "Camp" is a small restaurant owned and run by the Native Village Corporation whose main business comes from a steady local clientele who mostly take out orders of hamburgers, fries and soft drinks. The boy dashed from his playmates to follow the money.

More than 30 years ago Simon Paneak, Nunamiut elder, leader, and helpmate to the many scientists who ventured to Anaktuvuk Pass, succinctly parsed the economic impact of mask making. "Masks," he confessed to Arctic biologist Laurence Irving in 1971, "is like gold."

Although my album of mask photos proved not the most successful interview tool, I had a great deal of fun showing it to a group of young Nunamiut girls who, out of boredom and curiosity, dropped in on us when there was nothing more exciting to do in the village. Among the visitors to our rental apartment that summer was Josie, Lela Ahgook's 10-year-old granddaughter. Like the other Anaktuvuk youth, Josie learned about skin sewing in the school's daily Iñupiaq language and culture class. Elders came to demonstrate skin sewing and students tried their hands at making skin mittens, slippers, or masks. Josie had made a mask and sold it for \$50, and Lela was helping her complete another one. During my next visit to Lela's, Josie ducked into the sewing room and retrieved her mask to show me. She had sewn the eyelashes on all by herself, she said. They looked very good. Lela had given

her some help with the rest. I asked Josie what the hardest part was. The hair, she answered. I wasn't surprised. The hair on this male mask came from the tough fall caribou leg skin just above the hooves. Lela looked at the stitching that held the beard in place and with her needle, lifted the caribou hairs over the stitches to hide them. Eager to add the youngest mask maker's work to my collection, I asked Josie if she would sell her mask to me and she agreed. "You decide the price," Lela instructed her granddaughter, and Josie finally settled on what she had sold her first one for—\$50. "That's good," Lela approved. "You're just starting." I wrote out the check and gave it to Josie who immediately handed it over to her grandmother for safekeeping. Then she was out the door to the school gym to play basketball.

I wish Josie's interest in skin sewing marked the hopeful continuation of a tradition, but I doubt it. The average age of the 15 mask makers in Anaktuvuk Pass is well over 50 and a new generation has not fallen in step to take up the craft. Josie has partially completed a couple more masks and her grandmother taught her how to braid sinew, but Lela recently said, "She's 13, becoming a young woman. She's not interested in those things now." I wonder whether the craft of skin sewing can weather the trials of teenagehood, which is frequently complicated in this village with early motherhood. The mask makers too express doubts.

In 2004 when I returned to Anaktuvuk Pass I had just published a collection of essays about the village and the village corporation had generously purchased a copy of my book for every household (BLACKMAN 2004). Amazingly, in the two weeks' time between distribution of the book and my arrival a number of villagers had actually read it. One of them was Clyde Morry, a lively 16-year-old. "Really good book," he enthused, "lots of old stuff in there from the 1950s. So what's your next book going to be," he asked me. "It's going to be about Anaktuvuk masks," I replied. "Boring," he instantly retorted. I suspect that many young native people share his view.

I struggle with the various conversations that have weighed in on Anaktuvuk masks: The souvenir hunters and collectors, wanting something traditional with deep meaning, and erroneously thinking they've got it when they buy an Anaktuvuk mask. The mask maker who says, "When I think about masks I think about money." My friend Lela remembering summer trips out on the land and telling me "My favorite time to work on masks is when we go camping." The mask as logo with its unspoken statement: "this is who we are," and not least of all, the challenge to me in writing about Anaktuvuk masks offered by a cocky 16-year-old who calls them boring.

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