

My childhood was spent in a household of radical compromise; with an Iñupiat Alaskan mother Floridian father, we made the move from Alaska to Florida twice and lived in ten different houses by the time I was 13.

Yet, in spite of the intermittent periods of distance from my tribal lands, or maybe because of it, I especially cherish symbols of my Iñupiat identity. More than half of the nearly 14,000 NANA Regional Corporation shareholders live outside of the region, so cultural symbols serve as an especially important means of connection to tribal culture. Even amid the chaos of my semi-nomadic lifestyle, I always make sure my precious ivory earrings and beaded necklaces were never far away.

But the Iñupiat symbol I hold dearest is a colorful rack of traditional garments, *atikluks*. Putting on my favorite atikluk seems to bridge any geographical gap I feel from my tribal culture.

Atikluks are traditionally worn over fur parkas in the winter, and alone in the summer. It was originally meant to keep the fur clean when gutting fish or picking berries. At the turn of the century, contact with traders established general stores throughout Alaska. Women bought colorful calico flour sacks and created beautiful atikluks from them, which resemble the garments we see now.

Today, atikluks are still very much alive in Iñupiat culture and have even been worn by Alaskan senators and governors. In the early 2000s, almost exactly a century after the first atikluks were fashioned from calico, Representative Mary Sattler started a widely observed tradition in the state legislature—“Kuspuk Friday,” which comes from the Yup’ik translation of the word.

My family's entire history is divisible by atikluks; an equation that can be applied for generations and generations back. I can easily separate periods of time by the atikluk that a certain family member wore during that year—my sister's teddy bear patterned favorite she wore in fourth grade, or a pure white one worn from my brother's babyhood. The oldest one I can trace is in sepia, from the only surviving photograph of my great grandfather Kisick.

Yet atikluks are not intended to be a measure of division; rather, they are intended to strengthen relationships. Alaska Native women from all over the region make atikluks for each other as gifts, or to celebrate major life events. Atikluks are worn in every day life, for tundra berry-picking or traditional dance and everything in between. It is not even uncommon for couples in the villages to get married in beaded atikluks.

When my grandmother passed away at a young age, she left my mother and her brother to stay with her best friend, a woman from the same village named Rachel Craig. My mother's favorite story of Rachel revolves around a beautiful blue and silver atikluk. In the haste of preparation for the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, my mother left the atikluk she planned to wear half-sewn, and instead had to choose another to wear. As she was about to leave, Rachel surprised her by gifting her the blue and silver atikluk that she had finished while my mother was working.

When I was chosen to speak at the Alaska Native Youth and Elders Conference last October, no dress I owned felt appropriate to wear. I had just outgrown my last atikluk, purple forget-me-not pattern with white trim.

My mother told me not to worry, and reappeared with her old atikluk that she had kept throughout all of these years. She told me we could pattern a new atikluk for me after the one she treasured for so long.

I picked out a deep red fabric, splattered with flowers that reminded me of those I always loved seeing on the tundra. We sewed it together, swapping stories and laughing. I felt closer than ever before to my culture and history.

Iñupiat culture is a culture based on sharing. A thousand generations of Iñupiat hunters, fishers, and berry pickers have divided their yield with those less fortunate. Without the core value of sharing, the culture would not have survived.

This value is illustrated best by the atikluk. Iñupiat women pattern them, as in the case of mine, from one shared by a friend or family member.

Each atikluk is a different, brightly colored expression of Native identity and pride. Every unique garment retains the basic pattern passed on through generations, though it may be longer or shorter, gathered or pleated, dark or light.

Separated by three thousand miles from my grandmother's village, it is difficult at times to feel close to my culture. I take comfort in the knowledge that when I wear my atikluk, I stand on the shoulders of hundreds before me.

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