



Nunivak Island, Alaska lies north of the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea and women living here continued to wear labrets similar to those of the Aleut until the 1930s.



A Chugach woman of Prince William Sound, 1778. Drawing by John Webber.



A Tattooed woman from Unalaska Island, 1790.



Eskimo men around Bering Strait, 1900.



An Aleutian man of Kodiak Island, 1817. Drawing by Mikhail Tikhonov.

TATTOOING AND PIERCING AMONG THE ALASKAN ALEUT



Lars Krutak
larskrutak.com

In 1741, the German naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller became the first European to describe the Native peoples of Alaska - Unangan or Aleuts on the Shumagin Islands: "One man had a piece of bone three inches long struck through crosswise above the chin just under the lower lip. Still another had a bone like it fastened in the forehead, and another, finally, had a similar one in each of the wings of the nose."

Stretching 1,500 miles from Kamchatka, Russia to the Alaska Peninsula, the Aleutian archipelago is a chain of windswept islands that has been inhabited for about 7,000 years. Traditionally, the term "Aleut" was used by Russian fur-traders to describe the indigenous peoples they met. Today, the Unangan (who speak the Aleut language) and Alutiiq (Kodiak Islanders) see themselves as distinct from one another culturally and linguistically. But with the invasion of the Russians in the 18th century, each group was gradually enslaved and organized into a collective force to labor for the Russian sea-otter fur trading empire.

Besides the dramatic decline in populations due to the introduction of foreign diseases after European contact, the indigenous cultures of the Aleutian Islands were disrupted to the point where many traditional practices almost disappeared by the time of the American occupations in the mid-19th century. Whether fueled by the Russian distaste of the "hideous" customs of tattoo and piercing or the Christian missionary's efforts to eradicate aspects of dress, grooming,

and ritual they found "deplorable" and "savage," body piercing, labrets and tattoos were rarely seen after 1800. The early 19th century explorer and writer Georg Langsdorff, speaking of the Unalaska Islanders, wrote:

Tattooing was at one time very much in use among them, particularly among the women. The neck, arms, and chin were, and a sort of coal-dust mixed with urine rubbed in; at present these ornaments are rare, and chiefly to be seen among the old women; Russians have made the young women understand that they do not consider their beauty increased by them, and this has rather brought them into disrepute.

According to most historical accounts, tattooing among the Aleut was first practiced when women reached maturity. On Kodiak Island, it not only signaled adolescence, but social standing as well. One 1790 report stated:

The tattoo at the chin the girls receive it at their first cleaning [menstruation]. [Menstruation is said to start late among these people, close to or after their twentieth year]... women pierced themselves with needles made of seagull bones, and they blacken[ed] it immediately with coals.

Whether fueled by the Russian distaste of the “hideous” customs of tattoo and piercing or the Christian missionary’s efforts to eradicate aspects of dress, grooming, and ritual they found “deplorable” and “savage,” body piercing, labrets and tattoos were rarely seen after 1800.

In the Unalaska Island district, the Russian priest Veniaminov observed in 1840 that aristocratic women were more heavily tattooed than laypersons:

The Aleut women had the habit of tattooing different designs, by ‘sewing’ or pricking...They tattooed the whole chin, two bands from cheek to cheek across the nose, two bands on the sides of the face, and one below the nose. But all did not have the same designs. The pretty ones and also the daughters of famous and rich ancestors and fathers, endeavored in their tattooings to show the accomplishments of their progenitors, as, for instance, how many enemies, or powerful animals, that ancestor killed.

On the whole, ethnographic information on Aleut tattooing was limited to outside European observers. Just as tattoo methods and forms were widely scattered, so too were other forms of personal adornment. In an attempt to offer some rudimentary interpretation of the meaning and function of the tattooing itself, it is necessary to include in this discussion a description of the other forms of Aleut body modification including:

nosepins, ear ornaments, and labrets. Aleut piercing and tattooing were natural symbols simultaneously linking nature, Aleut society and culture into one organic whole. Body adornment justified human existence by not only influencing the supernatural and the dead, but by influencing the wishes and actions of other living individuals in the community itself.

Nosepins

Nosepins were worn by all indigenous groups of the Aleutian chain, by both sexes, with the incision being pierced shortly after birth. The ornament might be an eagle’s feather shaft, a sea lion whisker, piece of bark, bone, or a leather thong with dentalium shells worn horizontally through the nose. Sometimes, women strung various beads of coral and amber on the nosepin and let them hang down to the tips of their chins.

More specifically, amber and dentalia were highly prized by both men and women. Although there were natural outcroppings of amber in the Aleutian Islands, most of it was obtained through trade from

other indigenous groups living to the east. In 1814, the Russian sailor Urey Lisiansky noted that the Aleuts valued amber “in as high estimation as diamonds in Europe.” Among the adjacent Chugach Eskimo of the Alaskan mainland, Captain Cook’s crew recorded that “one pair of amber ornaments was worth two sea-otter skins (\$90-100 a skin)” in the 1780s. Dentalia, however, were procured exclusively from indigenous traders living southeast of the Aleutian Archipelago in the vicinity of Hecate Strait near the Queen Charlotte Islands, Canada. Here the indigenous traders of the shell immersed “in the water the body of someone who has died, or of a slave killed specially for the purpose” to attract the worms that live in the shell casings. On Kodiak Island, a pair of dentalia was worth “an entire squirrel-skin parka” in 1805.



Eskimos of Kotzebue Sound, Alaska wearing labrets, 1822. Drawing by Louis Choris

Ear Ornaments

Ear ornaments were another common form of adornment. Oftentimes, there were holes pierced all around the rim of the ear with dentalium shells, beads of shell, bone, and amber placed in each orifice. An Unangan Attu Islander, before she was given to her husband in marriage, had ten sea lion whiskers pierced into each ear. Sea lion whiskers were considered

to be very valuable and were regarded as trophies that indicated a good hunter, or the wife of a good hunter, since each animal has only four whiskers and “any number of them together must be a testimony of having captured a great many.” These whiskers also adorned the wooden hunting gear of Aleut men or were used as ornaments in the nose.

A visitor to the Andreanov Islands in 1761 noted, “instead of earrings put into their ears the women wear eagles’ and geese feathers behind the ears.” In the Kagamil Island burial caves, the physical anthropologist Ales Hrdlička found numerous bird skulls, bones, the skins of hawks, dried bird wings buried with the mummies of children and even a bird feather “still stuck in the ear of one of the mummified heads.”

Certainly, particular birds were seen as protective animals in the afterlife and not surprisingly the early 19th century Kodiak Islanders raised eagles as pets, using their feathers in ritual festivals to honor the sun. Their beaks not only represented the power of predation and killing but also stood for the male procreative power. The speed, cunning, and accuracy of these birds were emulated by Aleut hunters who with their beak-like hunting visor, decorated with carved



Yet when the Russians first made contact with the peoples of the Aleutian archipelago, the one custom that intrigued them the most was the insertion of various types of labrets into the lower lip and cheek.

ivory “wings” and a “tail” of sea lion whiskers, became transformed into a powerful bird of prey whilst hunting upon the open seas in their kayaks. The hunter’s harpoon magically became a talon and bore sculptural forms of a fanged wolf-like creature that assisted in capturing game.

Labrets

Yet when the Russians first made contact with the peoples of the Aleutian archipelago, the one custom that intrigued them the most was the insertion of various types of labrets into the lower lip and cheek. Captain Cook noted in the 1770s “what the men have thrust thro the hole in the underlip has the resemblance of 2 Boars tusk, and are 2 pieces of bone about 1 ½ Inch long joining in the middle of the lip, & separating, by means of the tongue they can move these bones, & make them point up and down. Others have a single polished bone the shape and size of a large stud.” Men perforated the lip by placing several studs of walrus ivory into separate holes that appeared to Captain Cook as representing “another row of teeth immediately under their own.” This style of labretifery was common on the Turnagain River of mainland Alaska and on Kodiak Island in the 1790s where “men wear up to ten garnets – white in back, blue in front – underneath their lower lip.”

The Russian naval officer Gavril Davydov wrote in 1807 that Kodiak Island women made “several holes in their lower lip from which they hang a loop into which are placed beads and small white bones. These holes vary in number between two and six. Their lips are pierced by close relatives and there is a great deal of respect, therefore, for the girl islander who has the most.” Although labrets of this type were usually worn for decorative purposes, they also signified the social status, prestige, and age of the wearer.

Piercing Medicine

Because tattoos, nosepins, earrings, and labrets were significant visual symbols tied to important realms of cultural experience, it is

possible they were perceived as having medicinal value as well. The Aleut believed that a manipulable power resided in the body that persisted in the dead through mummification. In life, this power was regulated at crucial periods, mainly through joint-binding with sinew cords. Joint-binding was practiced when a young girl had her first menses, and when a husband or wife died. The Aleut also dismembered the bodies of enemies and dangerous persons at their joints as a way of protecting the living from the evil dead, because religious belief dictated that the soul of the departed remained on earth as long as the corpse was intact. The practice even extended to honored birds, such as the eagle and owl; creatures that were believed to embody supernatural power through their association with celestial bodies of both light and darkness.

The Aleut also practiced forms of medicine akin to acupuncture and moxabustion. In this sense, it is probable that they had some conception of Chinese yin/yang cosmology and attempted to regulate “good” and “bad” energies through the plugging of orifices. To this end, it would seem to follow that the Aleut had a similar concept in regards to body piercing. The anthropologist Grant Keddie has stated that “the labret may demonstrate one’s spiritual mastery over bodily entrances from which spirits enter and exit and therefore by analogy one’s power over the forces of nature.”



A man of Turnagain River, Alaska, 1778. Drawing by John Webber.



Man of Unalaska Island displaying labrets and nosepin.
Drawing by John Webber.

usually at the critical age of early youth when shamanistic inspiration first manifested itself. Although there were varying degrees of transformation, the eminent ethnographer Waldemar Bogoras stated that the role reversal among the Chukchi was completed once the boy left “off all pursuits and manners of his sex...He throws away the rifle and the lance, the lasso of the reindeer herdsman, the harpoon of the seal-hunter, and takes to the needle and the skin-scraper. He learns the use of these quickly, because the ‘spirits’ are helping him all the time.”

Aleut Adornment

Aleut adornment not only satisfied the need for display, celebration, and accomplishment, it also embodied religious beliefs about the relationships between humans, animals, and the deities who controlled human destiny and the surrounding world. For the inhabitants of this broken island chain, body art was created not only to lure, please, and honor the spirits of animals; it also increased the social status, spiritual power, and beauty of the adorned by inscribing male, female, and transgendered personhood.

But Aleut tattoos and piercings also cloaked or camouflaged the physical body from supernatural forces that inhabited the maritime environment. This view, widely held for many indigenous societies around the world, falls into the long-standing tradition of prophylactic “magic” aimed at warding off penetration or possession by evil forces that targeted vulnerable body passageways: namely the natural openings of the body (eyes, ears, mouth, etc.). Because the fear inspired by spirits in the landscape was great, Aleut peoples were compelled to develop a complex of personal adornment to neutralize the advances of supernatural entities. And in this way, they attempted to project themselves beyond their everyday limits of space and time, and on some collective level, they perhaps envisioned supernatural control and, ultimately, their own immortality in the human bodies they manipulated.

Literature

Bogoras, Waldemar. (1904-09). *The Chukchee. The Jesup North Pacific Expedition 7, Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York.

Hrdlička, Aleš. (1944). *The Anthropology of Kodiak Island*. Philadelphia: The Wistar Institute. –(1945). *The Aleutian and Commander Islands and Their Inhabitants*. Philadelphia: The Wistar Institute.

Keddie, Grant. (1981). “The Use and Distribution of Labrets on the North Pacific Rim.” *Syesis* 14: 59-80.

Langsdorff, Georg H. von. (1813-1814). *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World During the Years 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806, and 1807*. 2 vols. London: H. Colburn.

Sarychev, Gavriil A. (1806-1807). *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the North-east of Siberia, The Frozen Ocean, and the North-east Sea*. 2 vols. London: J.G. Barnard.

Veniaminov, Ivan E.P. (1840). *Zapiski ob ostrovakh Unalashkinskago otdiela* [Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District]. 3 vols. St. Petersburg: Russian-American Company. **P**

Article © 2008 Lars Krutak

Revolutionizing Aftercare
For Piercing, Stretching,
Tattooing and Permanent Cosmetics

NEW!
TATTOO THERAPY™
“The ONLY Aftercare” for
Tattoos & Permanent Cosmetics

Desert Palms Emu Ranch, LLC
Specializing in Emu Oil and
all natural Emu Oil aftercare products.
www.desertpalmsemu.com
623-877-EMUS (3687)

