

HONORING EYAK: FEATHERED CROWNS GR: 3-5 (LESSON 1)

Elder Quote:

“When Galushia (Nelson) was a child, the Eyak at Alaganik gave a potlatch to which the Tlingit from Kayak Island and Chilkat were invited. The Tlingit fired shots before landing and waited in the river, singing for some time. After they landed they sang again. They did not have to sing much that first day because they were tired. They were painted and dressed in Chilkat blankets. On the second day, the hosts gave them a feast of fish and meat.”¹

Grade Level: 3-5

Overview: Potlatches, ceremonial gatherings to commemorate important events involved the special clothing worn to honor the occasion, as well as songs and games, to enliven the festivities. Here students will make and decorate a feathered crown worn by men with a traditional Eyak pattern and learn about potlatch customs.

Standards:

<i>AK Cultural:</i>	<i>AK Content:</i>	<i>CRCC:</i>
B1: Acquire insights from other cultures without diminishing the integrity of their own.	Geography B1: Know that places have distinctive characteristics	L1: Students should understand the value and importance of the Eyak language and be actively involved in its preservation.

Lesson Goal: Students make Eyak feathered crowns and play traditional potlatch games.

Lesson Objectives: Students will:

- Learn about potlatch traditions
- Make a feathered crown with traditional Eyak design
- Learn the Eyak vocabulary listed below.

Vocabulary Words:

English:	Eyak:
people (the Eyak people)	daXunhyuu
(my) head	(si)shaaw
feather	t’ahL

Materials/Resources Needed:

- Access to video screen
- Map of Alaska
- Tanned leather bands roughly 3’ by 20-24” – one per student
- Awl – for punching hole for ties

- Rawhide shoe laces for ties – one per student
- Glue, scissors
- White ink pad – two for class
- 1” square stamp (to print diamond pattern) – four to six for class
- Feathers – 5-10 per student
- *Optional:* tapestry needles, dental floss (to sew band together)

Kit Library:

- Birket-Smith, Kaj, and Frederica de Laguna. *The Eyak Indians of the Copper River Delta, Alaska*. AMS Pr, 1976.

Teacher Preparation:

- Review Activity Plan and practice Eyak vocabulary.
- Decide whether students will use ties to secure the headbands or sew them together.
- Assemble needed materials above.

Opening:

Referring to a map of Alaska, point out the traditional territory of the Eyak and note the presence of their more numerous neighbors. To the west- were the Sugpiaq of Prince William Sound; to the north- the Ahtna up the Copper River; and to the southeast were the Tlingit. As the smaller tribe, the Eyak often served as neutral middlemen in trade negotiations between these sometimes aggressive groups.

Some 3,000 years ago the Eyak left the Interior of Alaska and migrated south to the Copper River Delta and the North Gulf Coast. At one point Eyak territory included Yakutat and the Kaliakh River area. But by the 1800s the Tlingit had gradually expanded their territory raiding and trading their way up the coast. In the Yakutat area the Tlingit assimilated, or absorbed, the local Eyak through intermarriage. By the same token the Eyak moved westward towards Cordova, replacing the Sugpiat who were there. The Eyak people’s language is unique but bears some resemblance to Tlingit though not to Sugt’sun, the language of the Sugpiaq.

There are no potlatches described in traditional Eyak legends or stories which could mean that the potlatch custom might not have originated among them. But over time as the Eyak interacted and intermarried with their Tlingit neighbors to the east, they adopted and adapted some Tlingit customs. The Eyak, especially those living in the Yakutat area, were especially influenced by the Tlingit. They are sometimes known as the ‘Tlingitized Eyaks’.

Like the Tlingit, the Eyak practice the custom of moieties (social membership of everyone in the Eagle or Raven moiety) and totem poles (carved ceremonial poles) and potlatches. Potlatches, great feasts of giving, are for special occasions like the dedication of a new community house; to remember a dead relative or warriors killed in battle, or to honor visitors. They are a feature of the customs of the Native peoples of the Pacific Northwest.

These special occasions demanded special clothing (regalia) from headgear to cloaks to face painting.

Share the photo below and ask the students if they can locate the following items:

- **Spruce root potlatch hats** (*front row left and right crouching left and right of wrapped object*)
- **Chilkat robe** (*man seated front row to the right of crouching man*)
- **Feathered crown** (*man seated center with nose ring*)



YAKUTAT POTLACHERS IN DANCING COSTUMES

SITKA, ALASKA, DEC. 9TH 1904

CASE & DRAPER

P39-788 Alaska State Library, Case and Draper Photo Collection
Yakutat Natives at Sitka Potlatch, December 9, 1904

Activities:

Class I:

1. Have any of the students ever attended a potlatch? What was it like? Accept all descriptions and note how the tradition has continued to evolve.
2. Traditionally, potlatch invitations were often issued to entire villages or to the Raven or Eagle moiety and lasted for days.

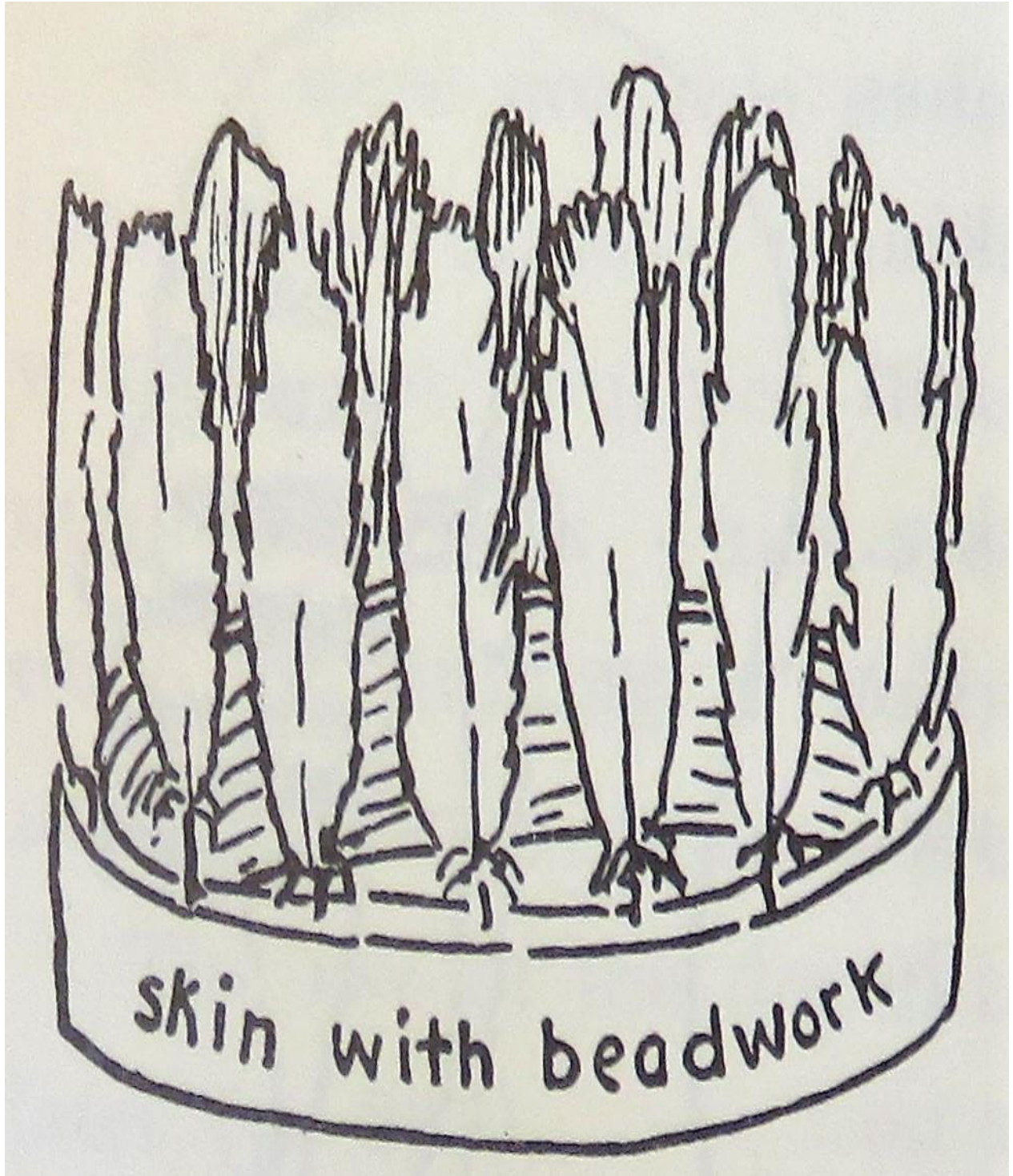
Note: All of Eyak society was divided into two moieties, Ravens and Eagles. A person's moiety designation is inherited from his or her mother. Moieties have no political or economic power. They serve to identify people and regulate marriage – one must marry outside of one's own moiety. Every Eyak village traditionally had one potlatch house for the Ravens and one for the Eagles.

3. Gifts were often distributed to the guests to demonstrate the extent of the hosts' riches (as in 'We are so rich that we can afford to give away these items.') Galushia Nelson, an Eyak informant from whom the anthropologists Kaj Birket-Smith and Frederica de Laguna gained much of their knowledge of Eyak culture, described a potlatch in Katalla – a three-day trip from Alaganik - which he had attended as a boy (around the turn of the 20th century):

““The hosts have to feed the whole gang until they leave. We were there a week.” ... The food that the guests had not been able to eat they took home in sacks and baskets. Their hosts had given away everything they owned.”ⁱⁱ

4. In recognition of the importance of these celebrations, special clothing would be worn and traditional songs and stories told. Lieutenant Abercrombie, was the honored guest at an Eyak potlatch of 1884, and described the headgear worn by the potlatch dance performers.

“At the dances which Abercrombie saw, all the male performers wore headbands, or rather crowns of wood, about 3 inches wide, covered with skin. They were decorated with glass and obsidian beads, stitched to the skin. The latter were obtained from the interior, he thinks, because he saw similar obsidian beads among the Copper River Indians. There were no shell beads at Alaganik. The beads were sewn to the crown to form a row of diamond-shaped figures. Most of the men had beads only in front, but Kai the shaman, had beads all the way around. There were holes in the upper edge of the crown into which feathers were set.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Sketch of Feathered Crown described by Abercrombie^{iv}

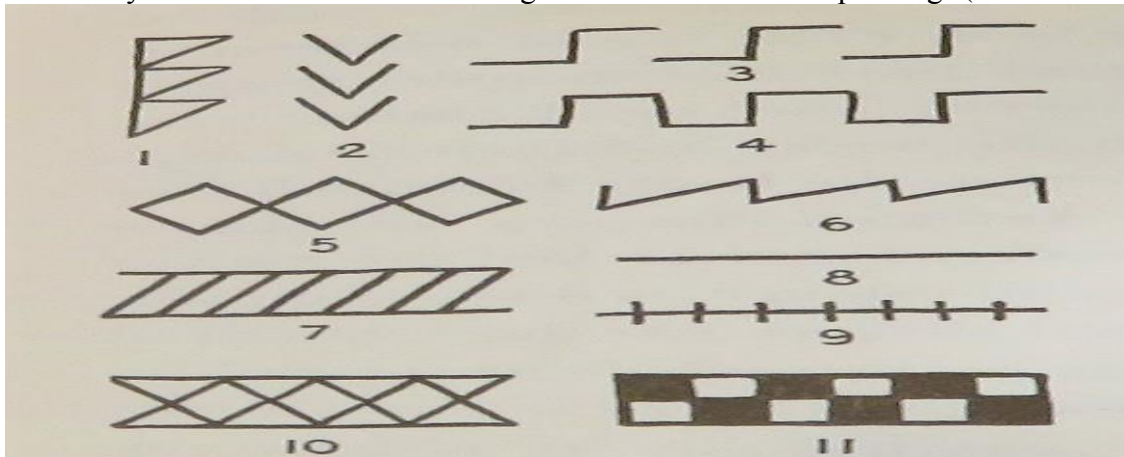
- While we have no photos of this potlatch, we do have examples of similar feathered crowns worn by the Yakutat dancers.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections


P33-33 Alaska State Library, Alaska Native Organizations Photo Collection
 Group portrait of the Yakutat dancers, 1959, Alaska Native Brotherhood & Alaska Native Sisterhood

- Explain that the class will make a version of these feathered crowns, though without the wood base. Recall Abercrombie’s diamond design description. Diamond shapes appear in traditional Eyak basketwork where the design is referred to as ‘face painting’ (See #5 below).



Basketry designs from a sketch by Annie Nelson^v

The name ‘face painting’ probably referred to the design painted on people’s faces at ceremonial occasions. A series of connected diamonds (See #10 above) was known as “together – each other” or as Eyak Elder Pam Smith says: “We stand together.” This is the design that students will stamp on their bands.

7. Distribute leather bands, laces, glue, and feathers.
8. Demonstrate how to assemble the feathered crown. While traditionally the tanned moose or caribou leather would encase a wooden band, students will make a more flexible headband with a folded over piece of leather.
 - a. Wrap leather band around head and note where to cut to allow a two to three-inch gap when wound around the head. Cut band to length. (Alternatively, students may measure leather sections to wrap completely around the head to be sewn together later.)
 - b. Fold the leather in half lengthwise and stamp a connected diamond pattern in the center of the band. 
 - c. Ready feathers to be picked up easily one by one. Fold band horizontally and glue together. While glue is still wet insert feathers securely into band.
 - d. Punch holes at each end and thread lace through the holes to secure around head. (Alternatively students may sew the ends of the headband together to fit snugly around the head.)
9. Have students model finished headbands and recall potlatch traditions.
10. Invite students to play a potlatch game: Individual students must imitate a subsistence animal while the others guess which animal it is.



Eyak male puppet named Galushia.
Galushia and an Eyak female puppet named Sophie
Were made by Mary Babic, Cordova for the Clothing Heritage Kit

Assessment:

- Students discussed traditional potlatch features and customs.
- Students created a traditional Eyak feathered crown.
- Students correctly pronounced the Eyak vocabulary words.

ⁱ Birket-Smith, Kaj, and Frederica de Laguna. *The Eyak Indians of the Copper River Delta, Alaska*. AMS Pr, 1976.

Birket-Smith, p.183

ⁱⁱ Birket-Smith, p.182

ⁱⁱⁱ Birket-Smith, p.59

^{iv} Birket-Smith, p.60

^v Birket-Smith, p.82