



## Commentary on Mitigaq film

By Bernard Saladin d'Anglure

The Inuit of the Belcher Islands, or Sanikiluaq, rank among the best in terms of bird carvings. Many of their sculptures represent important bird life.

So here we have a hunter, building a blind next to a small lake where he can keep a lookout for wild birds. What he wants are eider ducks, or perhaps loons, that can be used for garments and other items. Here we see ducks, or they might be geese also, that are hunted using a dart called *nuiq* (*nuit* is the plural of *nuiq*, which is the dart, the small barbed point, and since there are several it becomes *nuit*), with a spearthrower, which is sent into the air with great force, and with its many barbs there is a chance it will grab onto the bird and injure it or cause it to fall into the water. Here, we see Aani Amittuq. The man, Samuéli Iqaluk, gives her a male eider duck and some small guillemots, smaller birds, which are eaten and their skins can also be used to make garments for children and adolescents. Men mostly wore clothing made from the black male ducks with white bellies, while the women wore clothes made of female eider ducks in tones of brown, beige, etc. These skins were not as heavy or resistant, but the women went out to hunt less frequently.

Here is Aani Amittuq, who later became the Mayoress of Sanikiluaq, where she left very good memories (she was mayor there for nearly five years). She is preparing to remove the skin from the duck. She skins the duck, she doesn't tear off the feathers. She takes off the skin the same way people in other places skin a rabbit, except that here, she starts with the head. She cuts along the beak to salvage the maximum amount of skin. The skin is valuable, because it has feathers, and beneath the feathers is a very warm, fine down that the Inuit use as insulation. And not only the Inuit; it's the reason for the term *eider down*, used in bedding.

Here we are seeing a male eider being taken apart. An incision is made along the back, and the skin is removed. The idea is to have a uniform rectangle once it has been dried. And at a certain point she turns it over. Here, she has to detach the area by the feet to get the skin there too, and then she can peel off the skin like skinning a rabbit. The woman uses her teeth like a third hand, to be able to pull more easily, and then with her *ulu*, the woman's knife, she finished cutting any small remaining tendons attaching the skin. She uses the simplest method for removing the skin from the leg area, by cutting off the webbed feet.

And here's the duck, one part ready to eat, either boiled or eaten raw, and then the skin that she dried. The skin was dried with its feathers first because it was soggy (the ducks are





often retrieved from the water) and once the feathers are dry, it is turned over to dry the inside before it can be worked.

In the second step, the skin has been dried and must be chewed, masticated, using the teeth. So older people, older women often couldn't do this step. They could sew, they could work, but they couldn't do this chewing because they didn't have enough teeth left in front, or had lost their teeth. Teeth were often worn down, traditionally right down to the gum, because even boots had to be softened by chewing, and it was the women who did this. They had to soften the boots with their teeth, and boots that had become wet and then were dried were very tough. The boots were not made from tanned leather, which is why they were waterproof, but they still had to be flexible. So here, they are sucking off the fat and the small amount of blood or flesh remaining, and swallowing it. It's very good, it's nourishing, but it requires good teeth.

This is the small conical skin tent that was used in summer, providing shelter and a place to work. The woman here is cutting the skin to trim the edges; she wants to have the maximum surface, but without rough edges. The most durable part, the dorsal part, is what will be used for sewing. So there are lots of smaller scraps, but they can be salvaged.

This is a gull, from which she will extract the throat, the esophagus, which she will use to make sewing thread. It's like a long tube that ends at the beak, and she's going to scrape it on the bottom of a container for holding meat, which is made from a piece of driftwood with an edge that was bent by heating it. Here, she is scraping with a metal scraper, but in earlier days they used scrapers of polished stone. She removes the remnants of muscles, tendons, and fat and washes it in the stream before threading it onto wooden stick that is also used for softening skins and boot soles. So she slips it over this piece of wood to soften it before masticating it. She slips it over, and it forms sort of small flat cylinder, which is left to dry for a few days, and when it's good and dry, she makes an incision and pulls the membrane off the stick so that she has a long rectangle of dried skin, which she will cut into very thin strips that can either be braided, or twisted slightly to use as sewing thread. This thread was a substitute for caribou tendons, which were more prized for clothing, the tendons that run along the spinal column of the caribou, as well as other tendons taken from the arms of marine animals or along the backbone of the beluga.

So here she moistens the thread with saliva. She has taken the thread from her sewing kit, which is made from the skin of a loon, a greater loon, the *tuulliq*. She stretches it, and she could also grease it to make the sewing go more easily, especially if she wanted watertight seams. You can see the small rectangle, she has already cut off some of the contours and she can make it straighter still, especially along the edges she is going to sew. For sewing, it is better if the skins are not too irregular so that the edges can butt up against each other. Joining up the pieces is a meticulous job; a man's garment could easily involve forty skins,

2



