

Yeil koowú – A Raven’s Tail Ceremonial Robe

Mille Gabriel, Shgendoatan George, Matthew J. Walsh

The National Museum of Denmark houses a very rare ceremonial robe from the Tlingit people of Alaska – a Raven’s Tail robe or ‘Yeil koowú’, which means ‘the raven’s tail’ in the Tlingit language. The robe is of a design archetype referred to as a ‘Lattice Band robe’ for a series of lattice-patterns employed in its design. It is comprised of four primary design elements as well as alternating solid outer bands of (faded) yellow, black, and white.

This robe came to the National Museum of Denmark in 1862 by exchange with the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg, today the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology. This was just five years prior to Russia’s sale of Alaska to the US in 1867 following a series of costly conflicts between the Russian colonists and the local Indigenous Tlingit tribes. However, the robe is much older, probably dating to the mid- or late eighteenth century. It was most likely collected by one of the early Russian expeditions; perhaps by I.F. Lisianskii during his visit to Sitka, Alaska in 1805. It is one of only eleven or twelve authentic pre-Colonial Raven’s Tail robes known. Much more than merely an object, this magnificent ceremonial *at.óow* – a Tlingit term designating not only a clan ‘crest’ or symbol of ownership, but also denoting a sacred cultural possession – is helping to bridge contemporary worlds and forge new and sincere connections.

Fig. 1–3: Collection: National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen; Object number: Kc.119; Name: Yeil koowú, A Raven's Tail Ceremonial Robe; Place & Community Details: Tlingit people, Alaska; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: mountain goat wool; Collector: unknown; Date collected: 18th/19th Century. **Top.** Yeil koowú Raven's Tail ceremonial robe; Object photo: Roberto Fortuna, Nationalmuseet. **Bottom left.** Shgendootan George's well-used copy of Cheryl Samuel's *The Raven's Tail* book; Photo: Mille Gabriel, Nationalmuseet. **Bottom right.** Shgendootan takes a selfie with the robe; Photo: Shgendootan George.



Raven's Tail Weaving

Ceremonial robes like the Raven's Tail robe were (and are still today) important and highly symbolic garments worn during ceremonies and celebrations among the Tsimshian, Tlingit, and Haida peoples of the northern Pacific Northwest Coast. When danced during traditional ceremonials, the Raven's Tail robes were believed to aid in healing, and in contemporary practice, they reflect the revitalization and strength of traditional Native cultures of the Pacific Northwest Coast. Ceremonial robes like the Raven's Tail and the subsequent Chilkat robes were (and are still to some extent) hand-woven from mountain goat wool. They were produced exclusively by female weavers using a unique form of hand-twining. Raven's Tail designs comprise contrasting white, yellow, and black geometric patterns and motifs, as seen in the 'Lattice Band' style exemplified in the robe discussed here. Most of the surviving robes also possess edge-fringes and tassels applied as relief features onto the geometric motifs, both of which would add dynamic aspects of movement and shadow-play when worn and danced during ceremonial events. Little is known about the traditional manufacture of Raven's Tail robes, as they fell out of use in the early 1800s when the form-line style so iconic of the later Chilkat designs became the ubiquitous style of choice among the local elite. The design and manufacture of the Raven's Tail tradition would have been entirely lost had it not been for just eleven or so surviving specimens that remain scattered across museum collections worldwide.

Tradition Lost and Found

In the late 1970's, American anthropologist and weaver Cheryl Samuel began what would become a lifelong project to revitalize the traditional weaving techniques and styles of northern Pacific Northwest Coast weaving. This journey led to her two landmark monographs, *The Raven's Tail* (1987) and *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (1990). For each, she painstakingly reconstructed the traditional manufacture and design techniques of these amazing expressions of material culture, utilizing samples housed in various museums around the world. Her work on rediscovering the Raven's Tail weaving tradition included careful study of the Raven's Tail robe hosted at the National Museum of Denmark, among others. These fundamental works would begin a cultural heritage revitalization effort that has at present spanned generations and continues to breathe new life into two nearly extinct weaving traditions from the Pacific Northwest.

One weaver who took up this call to reignite interest in Native weaving was Shgendootan 'Shgen' George. Shgen was raised in the Tlingit village of Angoon, Alaska, in her clan house *Kéet Ooxhú hit*, the Killer Whale Tooth House. She is

Dakl'weidi (Killer Whale clan) and the child of the *Deisheetaan* (Raven/Beaver clan). Shgen retired from her calling as a schoolteacher in 2020 and is now a full-time practising artist, dividing her time between Juneau and Angoon, Alaska. Her primary art forms are Raven's Tail and Chilkat weaving, which she learned from Clarissa Rizal and the above-mentioned Cheryl Samuel, and Tlingit beadwork, which she learned from her grandmother Lydia George.

The Circle is Complete

In September of 2022, the authors convened in Copenhagen and Brede, Denmark, as part of a workshop organized at the National Museum of Denmark under the auspices of the TAKING CARE project.

The meeting would mark the first time that Shgen would come face-to-face with the Raven's Tail robe housed at the National Museum. However, as it turns out, this was not the beginning of their story. During the authors' time together with the robe, Shgen shared with the research group a worn and very used copy of Cheryl Samuel's pivotal book *The Raven's Tail*. Serendipitously, it had been from photographs of this very robe in Samuel's volume that Shgen had first learned to weave the Raven's Tail technique! During the workshop, she regularly consulted her copy of *The Raven's Tail*, setting it down beside the ancient robe, revealing a series of dog-eared and heavily worn pages, each with underlined passages and notes in every margin. Devotedly inscribed notes included arrows pointing to various images and hand-written personal sketches, sections circled, and points of reference scribbled, all detailing various aspects of the technical manufacture of the particular robe under examination.

Describing the experience, Shgendootan George explains:

I don't have the words to express the overwhelming emotions that come with visiting that robe. The power and connection that I felt being in its presence were immense. Knowing that it had been danced by our ancestors hundreds of years ago, it felt like a bridge between times. When we bring these types of objects out in ceremony we talk about them as holding the spirit of those who wore them, it is as if the previous people who used the objects are right there with us. This brings so much comfort and support to those who are looking on at it. I truly felt as if I was visiting a relative when I got to visit that robe.

Overall, this meeting was a powerful one for all involved. The experience drove home the value and utter necessity for ethnographic museums to actively collaborate with and facilitate descendant communities and stakeholders to enable them to actively engage with museum collections. We are truly grateful to have had this opportunity to share this experience together and collectively look forward to many more such prospects in the future.