

The Fish Skin Road

Mapping Indigenous Knowledge from the Lower Amur River
to Sakhalin Island

Elisa Palomino

Preface

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Inner skin, outer skin... gutskin, fishskin. Growing up in a second-generation American family in Detroit and helping to make fresh sausage before the holiday season, I inflated gutskin to thread onto the end of the family hand-operated meat grinder. Little did I know that gutskin was used for other purposes too. After taking my degrees in anthropology and beginning work in the museum field I discovered gutskin was used in the Arctic to make parkas and other utilitarian items. A historic photograph in the Archives of the Penn Museum shows a group of Indigenous Yupik women inflating seal gutskin to begin the process of making parkas. I was taken right back to my childhood. At the Museum the material from the Arctic (especially Alaska) forms our largest collection. This is where I also first discovered fish skin used as a material for containers. I was equally intrigued. This ultimately led to my discovery of the work of Elisa Palomino in an article in the Arctic Studies Center Newsletter in 2021. I contacted her through the Center and invited her to visit and study our circumpolar collection of 80 objects made of fish skin (clothing and utilitarian objects), especially our Amur River material which holds eight robes (some illustrated in this book).

In this publication she focuses on four Indigenous groups: the Nanai and Nivkh on the Russian side of the river, the Hezhe on the Chinese side, and the Ainu in Japan. She has carefully read all of the historical and anthropological literature and presents this material in a coherent text that is a pleasure to read. Most importantly, Dr. Palomino has tanned fish skin and knows the intricacies of the process. She has learned at the hands of contemporary practitioners of this art form (which is not something many scholars can claim). Dr. Palomino has also worked with collections of this material in 29 ethnological museums worldwide and brings a keen eye to this study.

So, I invite you (like the salmon and sturgeon) to travel the Amur River eastbound to the sea with Elisa Palomino as she explores these four indigenous cultures and their dependency on these fish for sustenance, shelter and beauty in their lives.