



**Akuilisaq,
Aaqatit and
Avataaq
- the three A's of
Greenlandic kayaking**

by Christopher Crowhurst



To many people simply paddling with a skinny stick is sufficient to consider themselves a traditional paddler, however as you dig deeper into the Inuit qajaq culture you will discover a wealth of alternative gear to use in your paddling that can enhance your exploration of the traditional Inuit hunting practice.

In *Ocean Paddler 51*, I shared the history of Brooks Paddle Sports, one of several paddle gear manufacturers who make a replica of the traditional Inuit seal skin tuilik. The tuilik is really the grandfather of the modern paddling spray cag, a paddling top integrated with a spray deck (or skirt). The tuilik is just the first of several traditional paddling garments that make up the modern enthusiast's kit bag.

The Akuilisaaq

The Greenlandic akuilisaaq, pronounced 'A-Cooly-sack', really is the original spray deck. Unlike modern flat spray decks, the akuilisaaq is pulled up high onto the paddler's chest or upper abs and then goes down to the cockpit rim, just like a skirt; it is worth noting that in the USA spray decks are called spray skirts, which is probably a hat tip to their origins. The akuilisaaq was used during the warmer months when the tuilik was unnecessary. The akuilisaaq was made from animal skin and worn with the fur facing inwards. To maintain water proof properties the skins were 'fed' (rubbed with animal fat) regularly, much like we feed hiking boots with wax today to keep them waterproof and supple. At the start of the warm season the akuilisaaq was submerged in water and held down with rocks to soften the pelts that dried out and became stiff during the cold months. Unlike a modern flat spray deck the traditional akuilisaaq gives the paddler far greater freedom of movement when seated (or rolling), this was especially important when throwing the harpoon, or recovering from an impromptu dunking.

The Aqaqtiit

Greenland can be really cold, so it is no wonder that the Inuit hunters developed great gloves to keep them warm while afloat. Some of the traditional mitten designs had two thumbs allowing the paddler to rotate the gloves if they became too wet on one side. Mittens of various lengths are available today in modern materials, however currently all commercially available mittens have a single thumb.

The Avataaq

The Inuit's primary reason for being afloat in their qajaq was to hunt. Hunting mammals with harpoons presents many challenges, not least of which is how to keep them from sinking. The avataaq is a bladder that was attached to the harpoon line, its initial purpose was to exhaust the prey, and then float the prey during recovery. Nowadays we visit the grocery store, so the avataaq has become used during rolling training and competition. It could be compared to a modern paddle float, however the avataaq is usually considerably bigger; traditionally the avataaq was an inflated mammal pelt. Being shaped like an animal skin the avataaq provides many ways to hang on to it, which is especially useful when practicing forward finishing rolls. During competition the avataaq is attached to the aft deck of the kayak and then a roll is attempted. The buoyancy of the avataaq makes it particularly challenging to get the kayak to rotate through 360 degrees. The roll simulates the idea of capsizing while carrying prey on the stern deck, which was one of the methods the Inuit used to transport food.

Modern interpretations

Two companies offer their own interpretation on each of these three items, Brooks and Reed Chillcheater. They differ in their philosophy considerably, which is great as it gives us options to choose from.

Brooks

Brooks has been in the Greenland paddling gear business considerably longer than Reed. Brooks's history, as previously documented, coincided with the revival of paddling in Greenland and the growing need for gear and a scarcity of authentic seal skin garments. Brooks took traditional patterns and attempted to maintain the shape and structure while replacing the material with neoprene. The resulting garments are probably the most authentic replicas that a modern traditional paddler can hope to own, unless they are prepared to make their own, of course. Brooks offers their products in standard sizes and colours.

Reed Chillcheater

Of the two, Reed is the relative newcomer to traditional paddling gear. Their approach is one of incremental innovation; arguably this philosophy is aligned to the culture of the Inuit who use(d) whatever material and tools were at their disposal to make the most efficient hunting equipment. Reed use a lightweight aquatherm material to make their gear, and rather than stick with the original structures and shapes they have adapted the patterns to suit the material and included other design enhancements only possible using modern materials. Unlike Brooks the Reed tuilik and akuilisaaq are custom made to fit the paddler and the kayak.

Comparisons

The two different approaches come with their own challenges and advantages; Aquatherm, Reed's material, is lighter in weight and offers easier stretch than neoprene. Custom fitting gear does not transfer well between kayaks and paddlers, making them really exclusively useful to an individual. The cockpit fit of Reed's gear is not adjustable, instead it fits exactly and snugly to the cockpit coaming, I send them tracings of my cockpits to get them made. This produces a great fit on the one kayak, but has caused me to standardize all my kayak builds to one coaming size to save me having to purchase multiple tuiliks. The Brooks gear, on the other hand, is heavier, warmer, and, by design, is able to stretch and fit a wide range of cockpit coamings. Reed has come up with an innovative solution by providing a spray skirt, of sorts, that allows an ocean cockpit tuilik to be fitted to a keyhole cockpit.

The Reed avataaq has a tee shape of tape sewn across it with loops on each end, this provides the paddler numerous ways to hold the device when using it as a training aid, and is an excellent design feature. However, unlike the Brooks avataaq, the Reed product does not have tie downs, making it harder to attach to the kayak for practicing the avataaq roll, or for temporary storage on deck. ►

The Brooks akuillsaq is adjustable at the chest and cockpit and has adjustable shoulder straps to hold it up. The Reed akuillsaq is custom fitted to the cockpit rim and is only adjustable at the chest, where it is cinched using shock-cord and a toggle. The Reed shoulder straps are fixed length. Just like a modern spray skirt, neither akuillsaq keeps 100% of water out of the cockpit when rolling, some eventually finds its way through the chest section, however in my experience they both worked excellently and are a great way to paddle on a warm day.

The Brooks gloves are shorter, coming just past the wrists, Reed's are much longer, coming to mid bicep. The Reed gloves have shock cord fitted around the opening allowing them to be cinched up to prevent the ingress of water, they are also larger, allowing woolen gloves to be warm inside to provide additional insulation. In my experience they do let in some water when rolling, so it is important to consider what you wear under them. The Brooks gloves are neoprene, designed to retain warmth once filled with water. They do not have a wrist closure, something that I think would be of benefit. It is worth noting that historically the Inuit were extremely careful about staying dry, their preference was to remain upright and out of the water. In discussions with John Pedersen, the former president of Qaannat Kattuffiat, the Greenland kayaking Association, he stated that traditionally the Inuit would move their hands closer together on the loom when conditions made it necessary to keep their hands dry.

Both Brooks and Reed make great gear, your needs and uses will determine which is more suited to you.

If you are interested in learning about the history of Greenland gear or making your own you can find a wealth of information at QajaqUSA.org

You can contact Brooks via: brookspaddlegear.com

You can contact Reed via: chillcheater.com

About the author

Christopher Crowhurst, an ex-pat Brit living in Minnesota USA, is slightly obsessed with Greenland kayaking. In 2010 he founded Qajaq Rolls, a not-for-profit business that promotes the traditional art of Greenland-style kayak (qajaq) rolling. Christopher has developed videos, diagrams and written instruction to help paddlers learn the traditional Greenland rolls, and promotes them through his blog <http://QajaqRolls.com>

In 2015 Christopher partnered with his father, Nick to form another not-for-profit venture and created the Shrike Kayak as a means to share their love of the Greenland style kayak designs. Their customizable designs are available for free, at <http://CNCKayaks.com>



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