Building a Sea Kayak—An Ancient Ritual

Their construction takes place with ceremony in the men’s house, usually under the supervision of some old man well skilled in boat-making. The men measure and cut each individual part of the wooden frame according to a prescribed system based on the length of various members of the body or a combination of such members. Thus each man’s kaia [kayak] is built according to the specifications of his own body and hence is peculiarly fitted to his use. After each part is meticulously made according to measurement, the frame is put together with lashings of rawhide. The workmanship must be fine, because no cutting with edged tools may be done once the parts are finished and are being joined.

The night after the lashing of the kaia frames is completed, the women gather to cut sealskins to size for the coverings, three thick and heavy hair sealskins for the bottoms and the sides, and two spotted sealskins for the lighter skin. As they work, the women wear waterproof parkas, which are believed to prevent any evil influence from entering or affecting the new kaia. After the cutting is finished, the women prepare food for the men.

The following day, while the women, dressed as before, are sewing together the skins, the kaia owners sit before the bows of the completed frames and sing their hunting songs in an almost inaudible tone, since these songs are both sacred and secret. Kaia owners often have their sons beside them to learn these chants, which descend from father to son.

After the singing, when the hides are nearly sewn, each wife brings to her husband a new wooden dish of fish or berries. Stripped to the waist, he throws a portion of the food to the floor as an offering, and prays for good luck during the coming hunting season. He then gives the food to the oldest man present (often the one who has supervised the kaia-making), who distributes it to all the men at hand. The owner then walks once about the kaia frame, pretending to carry a lighted lamp. Next he motions as if to shove a lamp under

—Edward Curtis, from *The North American Indian*, vol. 12, 13, 14

Courtesy Johnson Reprint Corporation