

# Animal-Hide Clothing and Decorative Arts of the Oroqen People

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of the Oroqen  
People

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**Abstract** *The Oroqen (鄂伦春) traditional costume refers to what the nomadic Oroqen people used to wear before they settled into fixed communities. With very limited contact with the outside world and with limited resources, the clothing material was virtually entirely animal hide. With settlement, especially after 1996, animal hide clothing has declined among the Oroqen. As an important part of Oroqen tradition and culture, the Oroqen people keep endeavoring to promote costume design through competition and exhibitions. Therefore, this paper seeks to present an insightful understanding of Oroqen culture and the formative features of their general clothing. We explored the formative features of Oroqen animal hide clothing based on an analysis of actual artifacts and literature. As a result, the characteristics of Oroqen hide clothing were found in five types – coats, trousers, hats, shoes, gloves. For the decoration, embroidery and applique were their way of decoration, and Mother Nature was their source of pattern design.*

**Key words** *The Oroqen People, Animal Hide Clothing, Sūēn(蘇恩), qihāmi(奇哈密), kǎohūluò(考呼落)*

## Introduction

The Oroqen people, with a population of less than 10,000, are one of the least populous minorities in China. They are referred to as “the King of the Khingan Mountains” (興安嶺), where they have lived for generations. The Oroqen are a hunting people and migrate for long periods and depend on hunting for their livelihood. Their crucial transportation is horses, for which they are also known as “woodland people on horseback” (森林馬背民族). For their tools made with birch bark, they are also referred to as “the people of white birch” (白樺民族).

The name “Oroqen” is a transliteration of the name Àolúnqiǎn (奧倫淺), for which there are two interpretations. The first is “people on the mountain top,” as wūrè (烏熱) means “mountain top” and qiǎn (淺) means “person” in the Oroqen language. The second is “people using reindeer,” as àolún (奧倫) means “reindeer” in the Oroqen language and the Oroqen used to breed reindeer. Their language,

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Oroqen, belongs to the Manchu-Tungusic family of the Altaic language and has no writing system. Their religious beliefs take the form of shamanism.

This paper seeks to present an insightful understanding of Oroqen culture and the formative features of their general clothing. The Oroqen costume, as a part of a visual culture, symbolized a hunting culture. Animal hide clothing embodies Oroqen culture itself. Today, in the turmoil of globalization and modernization where the authentic local cultures of minorities are quickly disappearing, it is time to study the extinguishing costume cultures of ethnic minorities. This paper aims to explore the formative features of Oroqen animal hide clothing through their type, characteristics, material, and patterns based on an analysis of actual artifacts and literature. The research material includes artifacts from the Oroqen Museum, Oroqen Culture and Craft House, and other private collections, including the authors' own collections. The survey was executed for ten days, August 5-14, 2015.

### *Animal-Hide Clothing and Its Practicality*

#### **Clothing material of the Oroqen**

The Oroqen are a hunting people who traditionally reside in woodland areas. They were a migrating people for thousands of years until they began to settle out of woodland areas in the 1950s. Before their transition to settlements, their clothing material was largely animal-hide, which reflected their hunting economy and regional character. The greater and lesser Khingan range (大小興安嶺) where the Oroqen live is the northernmost and coldest region in China. For seven months a year, the average temperature is below zero Celsius and the region is covered with ice and snow. The temperature can fall to as low as -45 degrees Celsius on the coldest days. To keep warm, the Oroqen use roe deerskin for its high capacity to retain heat, and this has become the most important clothing material for them. This is also due to the high population of roe deer in the region.

Sable, otters, and lynx all have fine hair, which acts to retain warmth, but they are also relatively rare and expensive. With the regulation of sable hide as a tributary item in Qing China, this material became particularly rare and precious and was only available at chūlēihǎn (楚勒罕) trading markets (Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association, 1984). Lower quality parts of the hide unsuitable for trade were used for trimming clothing or hats.

In order to use hide for clothing, the first step involves tanning. Skilled Oroqen women tan the hide with primitive tools to make it soft, clean, and bright without damaging the skin or fur (Figure 1 & 2). After drying the hide, they apply a mixture of boiled liver of roe deer and water. After letting it sit for a day, the hide becomes soft. Then, with a special, two-foot long, arced scraper with a jagged blade called a kèdèrè (克得熱), they repeatedly scrape and rub the hide to flake off the outer skin and dirt. They next scrape it with a two-foot-long dull bladed scraper called a mòdàn (莫旦) in Figure 3. Through this repeated process, the leather becomes soft, shiny, and elastic. For the final part of the process, the hide is stretched and smoked over a fire of rotten firewood. This process ensures the hide will not stiffen if it comes into contact with water.

The Oroqen also use the tendon of animals to sew hides together to make clothing, including that of roe deer, deer, and elk (Figure 4.). Once dried in the wind and shade, the tendons are pounded with wooden hammers to soften them. Finally, the tendon is twisted by hand to make thread. The result is stitching that is strong and durable enough to outlast the clothing itself.



**Figure 1.**  
Women tanning leather for making clothes  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 2.**  
Women tanning leather for making clothes  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 3.**  
Mòdàn (抹淡)  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 4.**  
Xu Mulegarter (蘇木希熱个特)  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)

### Types and characteristics of Oroqen clothing

#### *Coats (sūēn, 蘇恩)*

In winter, the Oroqen wear leather coats (皮袍) regardless of gender or age. In the Oroqen language, leather coats shown in Figure 5 are called sūēn (蘇恩). Winter clothing is made from the hide of roe deer for its fine, wooly hair. The clothing of both men and women are similar in shape, with fastening on the right, a small standing collar, and slits along the side that facilitate horse riding.

For men, *sūēn* typically have two slits in the front and back, with some exception of four slits (Figure 6). For women, *sūēn* have slits only on the side and fit tightly to the body (Figure 7). In general, *sūēn* have the natural color of roe deer hide, while ceremonial *sūēn*, for example for weddings, is colored yellow by smoking it over rotten firewood or dyeing it in water extracted from rotten wood after bring it to a boil. Men wear *sūēn* with a leather belt, while elderly women wear it with a white sash. Originally, *sūēn* featured buttons made from the bones of animals, including cylindrical buttons with a sunken center made with small cuts of deer or elk bone. Later, when metal buttons were introduced, the Oroqen discontinued making buttons from grinding bones. Some Oroqen also used leather buttons made with knotted straps for their *sūēn*. During spring, summer, and autumn, the Oroqen wore short leather coats called *kālāqī* (卡拉氣) or *gūlāmī* (古拉米). These are made from the leather of doe deer with the hair removed, or *hóngmáogàngzi* (紅毛杠子), and are usually colored orange. These are mostly fastened on the right, but for men the bodices meet in the center. *Gūlāmī* can be worn with the fur facing outward, which both repels the rain and makes good camouflage for hunting. Later, after woven textiles were introduced, Oroqen men and women both started to wear coats made with woven material.

Vests, or *deālìè* (得呵列), are particularly popular with both men and women (Figure 8 & 9). They are usually fastened at the center and have slits on both sides (Kim, 2010).



**Figure 5.**  
Suen  
(Photography by Liyan A,  
2015)



**Figure 6.**  
Suen for men (Qiu, 1984)



**Figure 7.**  
Suen for women  
(Photography by Yazhi  
Wu, 2015)



**Figure 8.**  
Vest (Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 9.**  
Vest (Honglei, 2010)

*Trousers (Èrikèyī, 厄日克一)*

Originally, Oroqen men wore short trousers (短褲) made from roe deer leather reaching above the knees. Later, they adopted long trousers (長褲) like the one shown in Figure 10 (Zhao, 1991). During hunting, they wore a pair of over-trousers on top of their regular trousers (Figure 11). Trousers, whether short or long, are called èrikèyī (厄日克一). Another type of trousers is the over-trousers, or ālēmùshā (阿勒木利).



**Figure 10.**  
Trousers  
(Honglei, 2010)



**Figure 11.**  
Over-trousers  
(Left: Zhang, 2011; Right: Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



The over-trousers consisted of two legs without a waistband or a gusset at the crotch. It had a trapezium-shaped upper part tied to a belt with leather straps. The material for these over-trousers was usu-

ally roe deer hide since this leather is relatively thick and durable. Alternatively, these over-trousers were also made with deer hide.

Trousers for Oroqen women are somewhat unique in terms of shape. These trousers reach down to one's feet and the legs are narrower compared to men's trousers. They have slits on both the right and left side of the waist and a frontal bib with a leather strap halter over the neck. These warm trousers accommodate horseback riding with chest protection like a brassiere. For decoration, they can be embroidered on both sides of the trousers, knees, or bottom.

#### *Hats (miètāhā, 滅塔哈)*

The traditional hat of the Oroqen is one-of-a-kind. These hats use the whole head of roe deer. The Oroqen bone the head but save both ears and antlers, the eye sockets are filled with shiny black balls, and the fur is used for the lower end of the hat, which is folded up as a brim and rolled down to protect the ears when it is cold. In Oroqen, this roe deer hat is called miètāhā (滅塔哈), and when worn by a child makes it look like a small roe deer bouncing with joy (Figure 12).

There is an Oroqen legend related to this hat. According to this legend, the Oroqen did not have last names. Once there was a father of five sons. The father gave different tasks to each son. The sons took their last names from their tasks. The fourth son was a roe deer-head hatmaker. His father was very proud of him and complimented him by saying gēqīn (戈欽), which means "smart" (Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association, 1984). His son then took Gē (戈) as his last name. This shows the pride taken in the roe deer-head hat. This hat is usually worn by men and children in the winter.

In the winter, Oroqen women wear either a felt hat or a round hat (四沿圓帽) with brims on four sides (Figure 13). The Oroqen did not keep sheep or develop the art of woolmaking. Felt hats were obtained by trading with Dáwò'ěr (達斡爾) merchants and transformed into something with Oroqen's unique color. These felt hats are trimmed with lynx fur and embroidered with beautiful patterns, with colored pompoms sewn at the top. Usually, they fold the brim upward with the fur side out. On cold days, the brim is rolled down to keep warm.

For the summer Oroqen men wear a bāli (巴里), a conical hat made with textile (Figure 14). The long back panel covers the back to provide shade in the sun and protect them from insects. Elderly women uses head kerchief over the forehead, of course it is in order to wrap the head. It can also protect them from the daily temperature difference. Young women a decorated hat called, qihātún (奇哈屯). It is a loop shaped headband made with thin leather or textile decorated with various patterns, shells, fish bones, and colored buttons (Figure 15). On the sides, three to five strips of colored beads are draped down to the jaw expressing the aesthetic sense as well as keeping the long hairs together.



**Figure 12.**  
Mietaha  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 13.**  
Oroqen women's hat  
(Photography by  
Xiaoyun Guan, 2015)



**Figure 14.**  
Bali  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu,  
2015)



**Figure 15.**  
Qihatun  
(Honglei, 2010)

*Shoes(qihāmi, 奇哈密)*

For winter shoes, the Oroqen use the hide from the leg of the animal. In order to make winter boots known as qihāmi (奇哈密), they use the tanned hide of a roe deer's legs for the main parts of the boots (Figure 16). The sole is made with elk hide pressed to soften, or the hide of a roe deer's neck. These pale yellow boots reach up to their calves. The front of the boots, pointed up with regular gathers, makes a unique look. Wearing roe deer leather socks and the qihāmi boots helps them keep their feet warm. This also keeps them from making noise when stepping on the snow, as they are tightly fitted to the feet. This is why qihāmi are preferred by Oroqen hunters.

Boots made with the hide of elk's leg and soles made with deer or elk hide, shown in Figure 17, are called *wēndé* (溫得). *Wēndé* have a similar look to *qihāmi* but are gray and knee-length. Wearing deer hide socks or padding with a type of cotton, known as *uwūlacǎo* (烏拉草), helps them remain sturdy, durable, and warm. The Oroqen wear these high-shafted boots in the winter, as they can stay dry in the snow during hunting. As with summer shoes, they traditionally wear *àoláoqí* (奧勞其) shown in Figure 18. These are calf-high boots made with the hide of roe deer's belly. The sole is made of tanned elk hide or the hide of roe deer's neck. Oroqen women love these boots as they can embroider them with decorative patterns. These boots display the valor of this hunting people along with Oroqen women's aesthetics.



**Figure 16.**  
*Qihami*, 奇哈密  
(Photography by Dong A)



**Figure 17.**  
*Wēndé*, 溫得  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 18.**  
*Alamuxi*, 敖羅奇  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)

#### *Gloves(kǎohūluò, 考呼落)*

Oroqen gloves have another original character. The Oroqen are exposed to the hazard of frostbite due to the severe natural environment where water instantly turns into ice. A small mistake while hunting can easily cause frostbite on their hands. Thus, the Oroqen women have made mittens, called *kǎohūluò* (考呼落), in which the palm is made with roe deer hide and the thumbs and fingers are covered with thin leathers of roe deer's belly (Figure 19). These gloves reach to the elbow and are tied to the sleeves with leather strips. These mittens have an opening at the inner arm where the hand can be slipped out to take care of hunted game (Figure 20). In this way, by keeping the back of the hand warm, Oroqen hunters can use their hands without concern for frostbite in cold as low as -40 Celsius. For aesthetics and durability, the thumbs can be applied with cloud-shaped leather pieces dyed in black.

Full-finger gloves go by different names such as *sàribāqí* (薩日巴奇), *fēnbāhēi* (粉巴黑), and *píqiàkè* (皮恰克), according to region (Figure 21). The roe deer hide of early autumn, when the hair grows out, is matured to be soft and white. This is the perfect canvas for Oroqen women to exhibit their skillful



embroidery and applique. The section on the wrist divided by two lines of stitched hairs within 3~4 cm is the most effective spot to decorate with embroidery in geometrical patterns. These gloves are a beautiful work of handicraft, as well as a warm and practical clothing item.



**Figure 19.**  
Khaoluo, Oroqen's mittens  
(Photography by Dong A)



**Figure 20.**  
Oroqen woman wearing khaoluo  
(Zhang, 2011)



**Figure 21.**  
Gloves  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)

### ***The Decorative Art of Animal Hide Clothing***

#### **Applique and embroidery**

The Oroqen are enthusiastic about their lives. Oroqen women, capable of horse riding and archery, are also talented artists. Women of old times used to embroider with bone-needle and animal tendon, and it was taught to daughters from a young age. The qihātún (奇哈屯) headdress, felt hats, and the sūēn (蘇恩) coat, as well as other Oroqen clothing such as leather trousers, boots, gloves, and bags and tobacco pouches, are highly decorated works.

Oroqen costumes are decorated with embroidery and applique. For applique, leather with different colors is used for contrast. The leather can be in naturally different color or dyed. They often use applique and embroidery combine. Oroqen costume decoration originated out of practicality. For example, the original applique design from ancient times was applied to collars, trimming, and sleeves with precious hide and fur. The first objective is to prevent wear and tear, but most importantly they are there to protect from the cold wind and stay warm. Later, this developed to the craftsmanship of applique. The extended use of applique includes hats, coats, shoes, gloves, and leather blankets. The highlight of Oroqen applique artworks is without doubt the kāpicān (卡皮參), or shoulder bag. Kāpicān is made with hón-gmáogāng (紅毛杠), white leather from a roe deer's belly, chinchilla hide in charcoal grey, weasel hide in golden yellow, or black spotted light yellow lynx hide. With the natural and harmonious combination of colors of these hides, the appliques take the form of various geometrical patterns, animal figures, or other patterns in an austere and free-spirited manner. Some bags are decorated with leather applique in the center, which gives a sophistication to their free-spirited character (Figure 22, 23, & 24).



**Figure 22.**  
Oroqenbag, kapican  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)



**Figure 23.**  
Patterns on kapican  
(Oroqen Autonomous Region, 2014)



**Figure 24.**  
Kapican, Oroqenbag  
(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015)

**Characteristics of Oroqen decorative patterns**

The decorative patterns on the slits of the sūēn (蘇恩) coats were originally designed to reinforce the slits for preventing tears in case of running or dismounting a horse. Both sides of the slits are reinforced with leather strips and stitched together from the top to form a 人 shape. This is a very primitive form designed only to reinforce the hunting costume of the slits. Nevertheless, this does not limit to practicality. This design has evolved to a 大 shape with a horizontal line added on top, and also to a 夫 shape by adding a second line. On top of these lines, embroidery in festive colors has been joined. The patterns in Oroqen costume began from a practical desire to make durable clothing and developed into a decorative art. The pursuit of artistry grew strong over time as more patterns have emerged, including M-shape figures, spires of sheep-horn, bow and arrow, antler, cloud, and other geometric patterns. These simple patterns have been increasingly enriched with complexity (Figure 25).



**Figure 25.**  
Decorative patterns on the slits of suen for men  
(Right: Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015; Cener & Right: Oroqen Autonomous Region, 2014)

A good example of the maturity in Oroqen decorative art can be found on women's coats. The coat is decorated with broad bands of different colors on its collar, sleeves, and openings. A thin black line is added to the outside of these bands. Colorful embroidery in festive colors decorates the space within the band and the thin line. The collar is adorned with precious furs. The thin black leather cloud sits on the shoulder beneath the collar as applique and the surrounding is decorated with colorful embroidery. Sometimes the shoulder would be directly embroidered with patterns in colors or decorated with continuous patterns. The bottom corner of the bodice is also decorated.

Among all the decorative features of women's coats, the characteristics of the Oroqen's decorative arts and the Oroqen women's aesthetics are well reflected on the slit decorations with their full richness and variety (Figure 26). In our museum collection, there are dozens of different kinds of slit decoration and these are categorized into two basic types. The first is the vertical rectangular band type with various patterns. Designs with geometric and lineal patterns have a diamond or overlapped diamonds in the center and borders and corners decorated with lineal or other small patterns. This is a relatively simple combination of patterns, which is considered to be a primitive form of decoration. They eight auspicious patterns (八吉盤紋) and flowers in full bloom are the main themes, but other patterns are added as well.

The second type is the decoration of symmetric clouds and geometric fill-in patterns (適合紋). These are usually decorated on the upper side of the band attached to the slit. Black leather is cut out in cloud-shape with two, three, or even four layers. For the background of the cloud pattern, some colored textiles are added and decorate the surroundings with colorful thread. In this way, the patterns in the center stand out in splendor with the strong contrast of colors. As the combinations of symmetric clouds resemble an antler or the facial features of a person, they are also called antler pattern (鹿角紋) or human-face pattern (人頭紋). Geometric fill-in patterns (適合紋) are designed to easily fill in open area and accommodate a wide range of decorating effects. For example, the + shape can house four patterns: up, down, left, and right. The Oroqen traditionally decorate bride's robes with + shape patterns with four magic lilies (南綽羅花), as this floral pattern symbolizes the bride's love. The harmony of the peony in the center and the symmetric cloud patterns resonates graceful beauty and solemnity.

Oroqen decorative design is austere, free-spirited, simple, and cheerful. The formative styles fall into several categories such as collective motifs, independent motifs, wave motifs, and decorative corner motifs. The collective motifs consist of two elements, an outer shell and a core. While the outer shell may adopt various figures such as squares, circles, ovals, and diamonds, the focus is on using highly sophisticated symmetric patterns for the core. Independent motifs, usually in shapes of butterflies, flowers, or small animals, do not adhere to the outer shell. These two motifs occupy the center of costume pieces such as slits on leather coats, the backside of gloves, the bottom of the cradle, the knee of leather trousers, and the center of a bag or tobacco pouch. Meanwhile, wave motifs, composed of rectangular spiral patterns called huiwén (回文), as well as petals and other continuous patterns, are used to decorate the borders of clothing. The corners of bodices and the corners of bags are decorated with decorative motifs that blend in with the centerpiece.



**Figure 26.**

Decorative patterns on the slits of suen for women

(Photography by Yazhi Wu, 2015; Oroqen Autonomous Region, 2014)

These motifs are the creation of Oroqen women, grounded in Mother Nature and flavored with their own imagination. These artworks are the vivid representation of Oroqen women's real life and understandings, and ultimately their dreams. Gloves made with roe deer hide, for example, are decorated with embroidery of flowers, butterflies, and clouds on the back of the hand. On the fingers, the joints on the back, and fingertips are all kinds of small patterns. These are linked to the centerpiece with foliage scrolls to integrate the work. In their mind, the centerpiece of the glove embodies the palm and the back of the hand. The patterns on the fingers represent joints and fingernails. At the same time, foliage represents bone structure and the blood stream. Only a people deeply engaged in hunting would understand this adherence to nature and further their imagination in this way.

Meanwhile, the magic lily (南裨羅花) has a unique symbolic meaning to the Oroqen. In Oroqen culture, an unmarried man is called "a lonely man," while an unmarried woman is compared to a magic lily. For a lonely man, the only way to find happiness is to pair with a magic lily. Thus, Oroqen women express their happiness of marriage with magic lilies by decorating gloves and tobacco pouches with the embroidery of magic lilies on the center to give to their men.

The Oroqen's traditional decorative patterns are grounded in Mother Nature. The greatness of Oroqen decorative arts does not lie in the mere imitation of nature but in their aesthetics and ideal life.

### ***Conclusion***

We have looked through the characteristics of Oroqen traditional costume. Oroqen (鄂伦春) traditional costume refers to what the Oroqen people used to wear before their settlement. With very limited contact with outside world and limited resources, their clothing material was basically animal hide. Embroidery and applique were their way of decoration, and Mother Nature was their source of design. After settlement, especially since 1996 when hunting was banned in the Oroqen autonomous area (鄂伦春

自治旗), animal hide clothing declined among the Oroqen. The number of animal hide clothing in museums now outnumbers what is actually worn in reality. The Oroqen have changed their traditional dress-making methods and their clothing material accordingly. Now their clothing material is rich and diverse and animalhide is rarely used. Decoration has also become diversified. As an important part of Oroqen tradition and culture, the Oroqen keep on making efforts to promote it by costume design competition and exhibitions.

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