

**Kwawkaka'wakw**  
**Blankets**

In ancient times, the Kwakwaka'wakw wore blankets made of furs and the type of blanket one wore, determined their status.



- Chiefs, Chieftainesses, Princes and Princesses wore Sea Otter blankets.
- Aristocrats of lower rank wore Mountain Goat, Grizzly Bear, Marmot, and Deerskin blankets.
- Commoners wore Cedar Bark blankets with fur trim along the front border.



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When the first European traders arrived on Kwakwaka'wakw shores, they were immediately attracted to the wealth of resources, in particular, the fine animal furs that would become the center of a new industry. In 1849, a trading post was established by the Hudson's Bay Company at Beaver Harbor, Fort Rupert. As the company demanded for more furs, they discouraged the Kwakwaka'wakw from keeping their precious furs for their own use by manufacturing woolen blankets for trade. This blanket became known as the "Hudson Bay Blanket".





The Kwakwaka'wakw eagerly traded their furs and began weaving ceremonial robes out of yellow cedar bark called k'ubaxw. The nobility wore finely woven blankets called gi'yaxt'amkan, while commoners wore blankets with a coarser weave called ko'pawis. These yellow cedar blankets had a fur trim around the neck border for comfort and warmth. Although the fur became minimal, it continued to identify rank. Eventually, the Kwakwaka'wakw began to decorate the woolen trade blankets, that eventually replaced their yellow cedar bark blankets. Today, the type of button blanket a person wears continues to determine rank.



The Kwakwaka'wakw decorated these new trade blankets with strands of cedar bark and abalone shells. These blankets are called k'angaxtola "a place to sew things on". The sewing of buttons to decorate the blanket began when a Kwakwaka'wakw man saw an Englishman wearing a buttoned suit. These men were called "Cockney Pearlies" and decorated their clothing with thousands of buttons made from cut out cockle shells. Eventually, the Kwakwaka'wakw were able to buy pearl shell buttons from China at trading posts and began decorating their blankets with them. These blankets are called kikugwitsam "having mother-of-pearl".



*Old Man, Standing, with Staff*

*Photographed by S. H. H.*

HEMARAHA IS THE WIFE OF THE MAN WITH THE STAFF - (Hemara).

Chiefs, Chieftainesses, Princes and Princesses wear button blankets called kisgamala “having many buttons”. People of lower rank wear blankets called ‘namdzuxsistala “having one row of buttons around the border”.





“The red borders represent the house posts and cross beams of the Big House and the neck piece is called the smoke hole. The button blanket crests displays the history of the ‘namima ‘clan or family’ that the owner belongs to”.

“The color red used on button blanket borders represents the sacred Red Cedar Bark Ceremonies. Red ochre is also used to paint the faces of the nobility to show their status and represents the color of life. The word “tłakwa” is used for both copper and red, both are symbols of wealth, nobility and power”.







- Coppers on the borders can only be used if the owner's family has a history of valuable coppers in their family or if they had bought and sold coppers.
- Arrows on the border signify a history of success in war using the bow and arrow; some arrows represent supernatural bows and arrows used by ancestors to obtain anything they desired.
- Harpoons in the front corner of the border symbolize a ceremonial spear used to harpoon a copper from the father of the bride during wedding ceremonies. It can also portray Halayu "death bringer" in the form of a harpoon used by certain ancestors to defeat enemies or easily obtain wealth.
- Mountains on the border represent the ownership of particular mountains as hereditary traditional resource places; also the wealth of a Chief that is piled up so high that it is like "a mountain".





Mirrors and ixt'sam “cut abalone shell ornaments” are sewn onto blankets to protect the wearer by reflecting any negative energy or jealousy back to the person that has sent it. The abalone shell is a gift from the sea, our greatest source of wealth. Abalone shell ornaments represent wealth and chiefly power that was needed in ancient times to trade for the precious shells.



Prior to wool blankets and money, when a princess was being married, her blanket was covered with valuable abalone shells. During the marriage ceremony the blanket was taken off of her and placed on her husband. This was a part of the wealth brought in her dowry to her husband that was to be given away by him to gain status amongst his tribe. This tradition is still practiced today, only that money is used instead of abalone shells.





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“Our history is not written down; it is in our carvings, our totem poles and our button blankets. Blankets for the Tłá'sála ‘Peace Dances’ were adorned with abalone buttons like the frontlets worn by the dancers. These blankets were used in the more important dances by people of nobility”.

*Late Chief Ol Siwid – James Sewid*





“The red borders on the button blanket originate from the days when our people wore blankets woven from yellow and red cedar bark. The borders were lined with sea otter fur and worn by nobility. When the Europeans came, our people began making blankets out of the early woolen trade blankets and added red cloth on to the borders to represent the noble fur trim. The four-leafed “flowers” on borders represent sacred cycles of four and circles of life; they have often been mistaken for a dogwood flower”.

*Late Dora Sewid Cook – Pudlas*



“Only ladies that have brought a copper to their husband as part of her dowry and the men that receive these coppers are entitled to have a copper design on their blanket”.

*Late Lily Dick – Sabalxit*





In earlier times, only the nobility had the right to wear a button blanket. The rows of buttons lining the inner side of the red border represent the number of potlatches your father has hosted. If he has hosted one potlatch, then you are entitled to have one row of buttons. If he has given two potlatches, then you are able to show two rows on your border”.

*Late Ethel Alfred – Tsolaṭi’lakw*







“You can only use designs and details that belong to your family”.

*Late Agnes Crammer – Gwanti’lakw*







**Adapted from  
Daisy Sewid-Smith 'Maya'nił  
“Robes of Power”**