Feather in her cap

Determined Hunter grad dons cloak

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WHILE MOST Hunter College students were heading to the campus bookstore to get their graduation gowns, Sarah Smith was negotiating with U.S. customs officials to get hers.

A member of an indigenous Maori tribe in New Zealand, Smith, 32, had a ceremonial cloak handmade to celebrate graduating with honors in her double major of political science and women's studies.

The ornate cloak, made of a variety of textiles and bird feathers, took 10 months to plan and involved more than 1,000 hours of handiwork. The project culminated in a journey of almost 9,000 miles from the Ngati Kuri tribe's homeland in the northernmost tip of New Zealand to New York.

But the painstaking planning suffered a last-minute hitch when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refused to let Smith's parents bring the gray-orange-and-blue gown into the country last Friday.

"We thought we had obtained permits for everything, but the Fish and Wildlife Service were concerned about some of the migratory bird feathers," said Smith. "I was devastated."

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and representatives from the only traditional Maori dance company in North America wrote letters appealing for the cloak's release.

Smith was finally able to pick it up Wednesday at Kennedy Airport after customs officials realized its cultural significance. She proudly wore it onstage at Radio City Music Hall, where Hunter College's graduation was held yesterday.

"It's been very emotional, and I am humbled that my tribe recognizes what I'm doing here," said Smith, who lives in Harlem.

The cloak is made of wool, silk, shells and feathers from one kiwi bird, 12 native New Zealand pigeons and one kuaka bird. The design symbolically represents Smith's journey from her homeland to New York, and the cloak must return to New Zealand with her parents in two weeks.

"The cloak is a cultural treasure," she said, "and the way it got here adds to the significance."
A Cloak of Many Colors, and Challenges

Sarah L. Smith, 32, graduated from Hunter College yesterday draped in her heritage, as the first Maori to graduate from the CUNY system. Her cloak was made by her New Zealand tribe’s members of feathers emblematic of their history and her accomplishment. There was just the matter of the confusion at airport customs. Page B5.