

## Bend — Perlluku

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**QUPURAQ PERTAA. – HE BENT THE WOOD (JUST NOW), HE IS BENDING THE WOOD.**

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Photo: Bentwood box with baleen lashing, Karluk One Site, Koniag, Inc. Collection. Photo by Chris Arend, Courtesy of Koniag, Inc.

From arctic Alaska to the forests of Southeast, Native societies have long fashioned objects by bending wood. Wood is a naturally elastic material that can be molded into many shapes with pressure, moisture, or heat. Alaska Natives bent wood to produce boat parts, sled runners, snowshoes, hunting hats, visors, mask hoops, rattles, and household containers of every size.

This widespread use of bentwood objects illustrates the importance of bending as a manufacturing technique and the skill of craftsmen. Bending wood is not very difficult, but it takes time. A carver must pick his material carefully, work it with precision and patience, and know-how the wood bends. If you rush, the piece may break. But when a thin piece of wood is successfully bent, beautiful objects can be made. From a single plank, artists create strong, useful, and exceptionally beautiful objects. To aid the bending process, carvers carefully thinned planks and sometimes cut kerfs. These small notches help the wood flex and provide space for compression along a bent edge.

How did Alutiiq people bend wood hundreds of years ago? It is possible they worked with steam in a *maqiwik*, or steam bathhouse, like neighboring Yup'ik people. Many late prehistoric houses had a small, low-ceilinged room devoted to bathing. People carried hot rocks into these rooms and splashed them with water to create steam for washing and perhaps woodworking. Steaming can also be done in pits. In southeast Alaska, carvers softened wood in pits packed with hot rocks and seaweed and filled with water.