

Dead — Tuqumaluni

IQALLUT TUQUMAUT. – THE FISH ARE DEAD.



Photo: Ouzinkie cemetery. Smith Collection,
courtesy of Tim and Norman Smith.

Death in traditional Alutiiq society was followed by a set of rituals that moved the deceased from daily life to the afterlife. In the Alutiiq universe, people were reincarnated five times. After their fifth and final death, the human soul ascended to the fifth of the five sky worlds, an earth-like place where their spirit could look back down to earth. The Alutiiq say that stars in the night sky are the eyes of ancestors.

A person might learn of their impending death in a dream, and shamans could foresee death. Dead people were dressed in their best clothing and jewelry, wrapped in sea mammal skins, and buried in rock or plank-lined graves. Others were laid to rest in the collapsed side room of a sod house or their remains mummified and hidden in a secluded cave. Tools and personal items were often placed in or on top of graves, which were marked with decorated poles. Wealthy people received the most elaborate treatment. They were buried in sea otter furs and their slaves were sometimes sacrificed. After a forty-day mourning period, when family members limited their activities, cut their hair, painted their faces black, and sang sad songs, the dead were memorialized with a feast.

In Prince William Sound, Alutiiq communities hosted a regional Feast of the Dead every August. Wealthy villages invited members of surrounding communities to a ceremony designed to provide for the needs of all ancestors. Guests participated in comical dancing and singing to console the grief-stricken, while musicians played large drums. The festival ended with a large feast. Here, hosts gave food and furs in remembrance of the dead. Other gifts were burned, sending them directly to the sky world to feed and clothe ancestors.