

Gift, Present — Pikiyutaq

PIKIYUTAT AMLERTAARTUT UQGWIM ACAANI. – THERE’S ALWAYS A LOT OF PRESENTS UNDER THE [CHRISTMAS] TREE.



Photo: Children at the Ouzinkie Mission Home with gifts of new clothes, ca. 1940. Courtesy of Tim and Norman Smith.

In traditional Alutiiq society, gifts were given to show respect, form alliances, and display leadership. Guests arrived in Alutiiq communities with gifts of food and were given refreshments to carry home. Gifts were also used to formalize marriages. Prospective in-laws exchanged items to symbolize their acceptance of a union. The most obvious form of giving happened at winter festivals. After several days of dancing and feasting, chiefs would distribute their wealth, giving away valuable trade goods and clothing. The ultimate sign of prestige was to provide a squirrel-skin parka for each visitor. This lavish gift illustrated the host’s leadership ability: his power to obtain resources and organize labor.

To ensure harmony with ancestors and continued economic prosperity, gifts were also given to the spirit world. People who harvested berries might leave a small gift to thank the plant. Similarly, gifts were offered when picking medicinal herbs to ensure that their properties would work effectively. And gifts of food were left on the graves of the recently deceased to provide sustenance in the spirit world.