

Kettle — Cainiik

CAINIİK KALLAKSAITUQ. – THE KETTLE DIDN'T BOIL YET.



Photo: Historic kettle in an archaeological site near Cape Alitak, Kodiak Island.

Drinking tea, a favorite pastime in Alutiiq households, has ancient roots. Alutiiq people have long steeped medicinal plants in hot water to create healing infusions. In the nineteenth century, Alutiiq people began drinking black tea obtained in trade from Russian colonists. With European tea came a variety of teapots, cups, saucers, and samovars. Samovars are tall, brass urns that burned spruce cones or charcoal to heat water for tea. Historic sources suggest that Alutiiq families often fired up their samovars when a guest arrived for tea, sharing a hot drink, a cube of sugar, and bits of dried salmon and brown bread. Samovars fell into disuse in the early twentieth century, when collectors bought up many of these remarkable pieces. At this time, Alutiiq people appear to have switched to simpler teakettles.

A copper kettle in the Alutiiq Museum's collections belonged to the Matfay family. This heirloom reached Akhiok in the early nineteenth century with a load of lumber from Woody Island. Elder Larry Matfay recalled that the kettle was a centerpiece at many family parties: birthday celebrations, parties honoring a boy's first kill, and evenings of storytelling.

Mr. Matfay also described how some families suspended their kettles above wood fires built on the floors of their sod houses. Small posts placed on either side of the fireplace rocks held a pole for suspending pots and kettles. Sometimes a kettle was set into another, larger pot to bring it closer to the flames.