

Lent — Pustaaq

PUSTAARTAARTUT PAAS'KARPAILATA. – THEY ALWAYS HAVE LENT BEFORE EASTER.



Photo: Augca'aq, an Alutiiq dart set. Carved by Speridon Simeonoff, purchased for the Alutiiq Museum collections with assistance from the Rasmuson Foundation.

In Alutiiq communities, the Lenten season covers the forty days preceding Orthodox Easter. The two or three weeks before Lent are often a time of celebration, in preparation for the fasting and quiet lifestyle expected in the days leading up to Easter. Before Lent, Alutiiq people eat lots of good food, hold dances, and play games that will be forbidden until after the holiday. Some people call this time “crazy week.”

Lent is a time of sacrifice and reflection when the faithful are forbidden to hunt or eat meat. Elders describe Lent as a time when families work on their homes or join to clean up the community, repair buildings, and fix the church. It is also a time for quiet visiting. Akhiok's Alutiiq Week, a community celebration of Native culture with art activities, language lessons, and traditional foods, is often held during Lent.

During Lent, children are expected to play indoors. Akhiok Elders remember playing a game where they would cover themselves with blankets while a child tried to guess who was hiding under each one. These restrictions mirror those in classical Alutiiq society, where children were not allowed to play outdoors until the migratory birds returned, signaling the rebirth of the year.

Men also play games during lent, particularly *augca'aq*, a dart game, where kneeling adults throw spears at a swinging whale model, acting out hunts not allowed during the season. Although Lenten restrictions have eased in recent decades, gambling is still considered inappropriate, and a number of villages halt community bingo during the season.