

Mother — Aanaq, Maamaq

AANAMA QUNUKAANGA. – MY MOTHER LOVES ME.



Photo: A mother and her daughter at a cultural celebration in their beaded headdresses.

Motherhood in classical Alutiiq society began at an early age. Alutiiq girls were considered adults at the time of their first menstruation, ready for marriage and child-rearing after the completion of a ritual seclusion. This seclusion took place in a special hut, or in later times, a girl's bedroom. It lasted from several weeks to several months, conspicuously marking the passage out of childhood.

Children were highly valued in Alutiiq society. Russian reports suggest that it was common for Alutiiq women to have four or five children, and women with babies were thought to be lucky. Women who struggled to get pregnant consulted shamans who offered fertility charms and spiritual intervention. A doll from an archaeological site in Karluk may be such a charm. It features a very pregnant woman with her hands at the small of her back and enlarged genitals. The doll appears to be in labor. A Russian source also indicates that women who wanted children carried dolls, caring for them like babies.

Mothers had many special roles. A boy gave his first kills to his mothers, which she displayed at a celebratory festival. Mothers also helped their children arrange marriages. A boy's mother would approach the mother of the girl he wished to marry, to ask permission for the union. In turn, the girl's mother would question the boy's mother to determine if her son was a good provider.