

Priest, Spiritual Leader — Kas'aq

KAS'AT MAANI, SUN'AMI AMLERTUT. – THERE ARE A LOT OF PRIESTS HERE IN KODIAK.



Photo: Priest officiates at an orthodox wedding ceremony. Clyda Christensen Collection.

In every Alutiiq community, there were individuals who functioned as religious leaders, or priests. These highly respected wise men were tradition bearers, trained in all aspects of ceremonial life. They were not feared like shamans, who interacted with dangerous elements of the spirit world, but revered for their cultural knowledge and ability to work with helpful spirits. This role was inherited, passed from one generation to the next, like the roles of chief or whaler in Alutiiq society. Questions that could not be answered were often referred to the community priest.

A priest had two major functions. They instructed children in traditional songs and they organized and supervised winter festivals. A family hosting a gathering hired a priest to lead the festivities, compose songs for the event, and ensure they followed proper protocols for seating guests, honoring ancestors, gift-giving, and many other activities.

In recognition of their role as spiritual leaders, Alutiiq speakers used the word *kas'aq* when referring to Russian Orthodox clergy, who filled many of the same functions as traditional religious leaders.