

Sick — Qenaluni

ALLRANI SUK QENATAARTUQ. – SOMETIMES A PERSON GETS SICK.



Photo: Qenasqa—Sick One, wooden mask, Pinart Collection, courtesy of the Chateau Musee, France, 988-2-210.

Before contact with Europeans, injuries were the most common cause of pain, disability, and death in Native societies. People suffered from drowning, hypothermia, falls, animal attacks, injuries caused by other people, smoke inhalation, poisoning, insect bites, and infections, as well as degenerative conditions including cancer, arthritis, and periodontal disease.

Among the Alutiiq people, two distinct types of healers combated sickness. Medical specialists treated physical injuries with herbal remedies, bloodletting, and even surgery. Their knowledge was considered secret but could be passed on to a special person. In contrast, shamans managed illnesses caused by misalignment with the spirit world. They prevented disease by ensuring that people acted correctly. When sickness was attributed to the supernatural, shamans worked with dances, gestures, and chants to divine the cause and develop a cure.

With the arrival of Westerners, Native people were introduced to infectious diseases from the Old World. Across the Americas, millions of indigenous people who had no immunities to these diseases were killed by colds, influenza, tuberculosis, smallpox, and venereal disease. Epidemics were a grim fact of life during Kodiak's early historic era. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were four deadly outbreaks of respiratory illness and a devastating smallpox epidemic. In 1837, this smallpox epidemic killed 738 Native people in the Kodiak region and spread to Prince William Sound and the Alaska Peninsula, where hundreds of others died.