

Snuff, Chewing Tobacco, Snoose — Iqmik

TOBACCO, PAULAMEK, CAYUMEK ILALUKU, TAUMI MILILUKU, TAWATEN IQMILITAALLRIIT. – ADD TOBACCO, ASHES, AND TEA, THEN GRIND IT. WE USED TO MAKE SNUFF LIKE THAT.



Photo: Whale bone grinders from the Karluk One site.
Kong, Inc. Collection, AM193.

By 1840, trade goods from Asia and Europe were reaching Alaska in large quantities, supplied by merchants in Siberian ports and Hudson's Bay Company outposts in the United States and western Canada. Russian colonists hoarded the finer goods—porcelains, iron tools, and gunflints—for their own use, but traded food and trinkets to Alutiiq people. Tea and sugar were distributed with tobacco, copper rings, kaolin pipes, glass beads, and English ceramics. Traders used these inexpensive commodities to pay Alutiiq hunters for valuable sea otter hides, which they sold for profit in distant markets.

With tobacco, Alutiiq people made snuff, a mixture held in the mouth. The most common additive was wood ash. On Kodiak, people ground leaf tobacco in a large hollowed-out whale vertebra, known as a kuRusuq, using a wooden pestle. Elders remember their parents mixing ashes from the woodstove, or from burned cottonwood bark, with long leaves of Black Bull tobacco. Other additives could include crushed dried nettle leaves or burned brown spruce cones. In Prince

William Sound, hemlock and yellow cedar ash were preferred additions. A little moisture helped the mixture stay together. For this purpose some people use water. Others moistened their snuff with cold, brewed, black tea.

Alutiiq people fashioned snuff holders from birch bark or alder wood. Hunters commonly carried these small containers. In embroidered skin bags, snuff could be found among the sewing gear, ammunition, and extra arrows carried by all kayakers.

In addition to its recreational uses, snuff had medicinal qualities. Elders recall using a mixture of tobacco and cottonwood ash to treat toothaches. People placed chew on or near the tooth to relieve pain.