

Song — Atuun, Atuuteq

KAS'AQ AMLESQANEK ATUUTET NALLUNITUQ. – THE PRIEST KNOWS MANY SONGS.



Photo: Alutiiq speakers record a traditional song.

Singing is a favorite pastime in Alutiiq communities. People of all ages enjoy sharing a tune or learning an Elder's favorite melody. In addition to expressing joy and companionship, songs are a form of storytelling. They record community history, express values, and once helped people to communicate with the spirit world.

There are many different types of songs. Today people join in favorite Orthodox hymns, but they also remember traditional verses sung for hunting, curing illness, praising ancestors, dancing, and visiting. Many of these traditional songs helped Alutiiq people obtain assistance from spirits. Powerful Alutiiq whalers sang songs to control the movement of an injured whale. Hunters learned animal songs to attract game. Shamans used songs to drive away illness caused by evil.

Singing was also a central activity at winter festivals. The host of such a gathering hired a spiritual leader, a member of the community well versed in traditional songs and ceremonial etiquette, to lead the festivities. Here, songs helped to move participants from the everyday world into a magical realm. Singing invited spirits to the gathering and appealed to them for aid. People also sang songs in honor of their ancestors. An ancestor might be memorialized with a mask and a specially written tune. Masks and songs were also paired to tell stories: to remember a great hunt, to recount a battle, or to share a family legend.