

Whistling — Kukumyarluni

PAAPUMA NIUTAAKHIKUT, “KUKUUMYARKUNACI, IYQAQ TAICIQNILUKU.” – MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD US, “DON’T WHISTLE; YOU ARE CALLING FOR THE DEVIL.”



Photo: Whistling mask, Pinart Collection, Châteaux-Musée, France.

Whistling is a fun, light-hearted activity in contemporary Alutiiq communities. Children make whistles from willow branches, hunters call animals with whistles carved from green alder, and comically masked carolers travel from house to house during Russian Christmas whistling and playing instruments. But in classical Alutiiq society, whistling was a dangerous and tightly controlled practice connected with the spirit world. Dancers at winter festivals called spirits from the sky and beneath the sea by whistling, which was said to mimic spirit voices. Some ceremonial masks even had a circular mouth to represent whistling.

Whistling was also associated with evil and sickness. In a house with a sick child, residents who heard whistling noises knew that evil spirits were to blame. Similarly, shamans used whistles to conjure the spirit world when curing the sick or cursing rivals. Many Elders learned that spirits spoke first with whistles and then with words. Children were taught never to whistle for fear they would be harmed. So, next time you find yourself whistling, remember, you may be summoning Kodiak’s powerful spirit world.