

Devil — Iraq

IRAQ ASILLPIARLUNI ASIITUQ. – THE DEVIL IS VERY BAD.



Photo: Long-headed, whistling mask, 988-2-182,
Pinart Collection, Château-Musée, Boulogne-sur-Mer,
France

In Alutiiq society, the word *iraq* translates as demon or devil, and once referred to the soul of an evil person. According to Alutiiq cosmology, instead of ascending to the sky world after death, like the souls of kind people, the souls of the evil stay in the human world. Here they become malevolent spirits. They live in caves or the woods and are said to have long pointed heads. Alutiiq carvers crafted long, narrow-headed masks to represent these powerful spirits.

Oral tradition suggests that *irat* were dangerous as they were hungry for human flesh. A story from Prince William Sound tells of a woman who ran away from her village. A year later a hunter and his wife traveling nearby encountered the woman. She had tattered clothing and said she was hungry. They recognized her, but realized she had become an evil spirit because her head was pointed. While his wife cooked some food for the woman, the man carefully snuck his boat back into the water. While the woman ate, husband and wife escaped. They paddled away quickly, evading the spirit as she yelled, “I want you two. I will eat you up”. For many years the people of the village would not travel past this spot, till a shaman sought the spirit and killed her.

Other stories suggest a link between *irat* and Alutiiq shamans. Elders recall that shamans took advantage of the power of evil spirits to travel to other worlds, see distant events, and send messages. One elder remembers a shaman who could communicate with other villages by sending a fire devil—a message that traveled with an evil spirit in a ball of fire.