

Naked — Matarngaluni

ATKUI NATENG, NUKALLPIAT AGNGUARTAALLRIIT, MATARNGALUTENG. – TAKING OFF THEIR CLOTHES, MEN USED TO ALWAYS DANCE NAKED.



Photo: Rena Cohen outside an Akhiok steam bath, 1990. Photo by Priscilla Russell. KANA collection.

Clothing is an ancient and uniquely human invention. No other species makes and wears clothes. Anthropologists believe that clothing evolved for both practical and social purposes, to protect the human body from weather and to share messages. Because of its cultural origins, clothing is closely tied to societal norms. Such norms dictate what types of clothing are acceptable, as well as when it is appropriate to be naked. In some societies, nudity is normal and acceptable. This is particularly true in the world's warmer climates. In other societies, nudity is interpreted as immodest, lewd, or even dangerous outside of proscribed situations—like a sauna, drawing class, or the beach.

Historic accounts suggest that there were many situations in classical Alutiiq society where people wore little or no clothing. When large groups gathered for winter festivals, the qasgiq, or community house, grew quite hot. Here men typically removed most or all of their clothing to cool off. During winter festivals, men danced naked, wearing only body paint, and shamans performed rituals in the nude. Nakedness was also common in warm weather. In summer, Alutiiq men might sit naked in their homes or paddle their boats naked. And after steam bathing, people enjoyed cooling off outdoors. They swam naked or sat naked on the beach.

Accounts of naked Alutiiq women are less common. This may reflect the power of the female body in Alutiiq society. Among the Alutiiq, men took life through hunting and warfare, whereas women gave life by having children. These two powers were carefully separated so that the strong, life-giving force of women did not taint the hunting ability of men. Covering the female body may have helped hunters to preserve their luck.