

West, West Wind — Llaaniq

MACAQ LLAANIRMEN KALUTAARTUQ. – THE SUN ALWAYS SETS IN THE WEST.



Photo: Sunset over the Karluk Church and Shelikof Strait, western Kodiak Island. Steffian Collection, AM628:419.

Among the world's cultures the cardinal directions—north, east, south, and west—are tied to the location of the rising and setting sun. For example, the English word west comes from an ancient Germanic word meaning down—referring to the direction where the sunsets. North comes from a word meaning left, as north is to the left of the sunrise. In Alutiiq, the terms for the cardinal directions also commonly refer to the direction of the wind. The word for west means both a wind from the west and the direction of the sunset. This is true of the intermediate directions, the points between the cardinal directions. The Alutiiq word *saniikiaq* means southeast generally and also a southeast wind.

The Alutiiq term for west comes from the root *lla*, meaning world or universe. This may be a reference to the distant origins of Alutiiq people. Archaeological finds suggest Alutiiq ancestors came to Kodiak from the west and legends record that the west was a spiritually significant place.

In the Alutiiq world, people were believed to die five times. After their fifth and final death, when a person was considered completely dead, they left their grave in a ball of fire and flew to the west. The west was the end of the Earth. Here a person's spirit joined the sky world, becoming a star, a planet, or a part of the aurora borealis. The west was also a place where evil spirits lived. A person who had been bad during his first four lives would become an evil spirit after his final death and could return from the west to torment the living.