

Light — Tanqik, Akirneq

TANQIK KUARSGU. – TURN ON THE LIGHT.



Photo: An ancestral stone lamp burning seal oil.

Once very long ago, when Alutiiq people lived in sod houses and paddled the world by kayak, the world was dark. A powerful chief controlled the sun, moon, and stars and only allowed them to light his village. Many men tried to capture light from the chief but failed. In one village, Raven pledged to bring light to his community. People laughed at him, but Raven was not dissuaded. He flew for many days, following the gradually lightening sky until he reached the village with light. Here, Raven saw the chief's daughter drinking water from a spring. Quickly, he turned himself into a piece of down floating on the water. The girl drank the down and became pregnant.

In time, the girl gave birth to a son. He was Raven in disguise! The chief and his family loved the little boy and gave him everything he asked for. One day the boy asked to play with three boxes stored high on a shelf. One box held the night, another the sun, and another the moon and the stars. A few days later, when no one was watching, the boy turned himself into Raven and carried away the boxes with light. He flew home and presented the boxes to his community. They were overjoyed and he was rewarded with marriage to their chief's two daughters. Since that day, the sun, the moon, and the star have illuminated the entire Earth.

This tale is very similar to a Tlingit story. Some believe the Alutiiq version came to Kodiak through interactions with the Tlingit. Raven is a common hero of Tlingit stories and Alutiiq and Tlingit people interacted extensively during the Russian occupation of Alaska. Upon closer inspection, however, this origin seems unlikely. Birds appear in many Alutiiq legends and include both a large, powerful Thunderbird and the savvy Raven. Moreover, Athapaskan and Yup'ik people have a similar Raven legend. Raven's theft of light is most likely a very old, widely told Alaska Native story.