

Divorce (to) — Uniyulluku

Uniyutuk.—They are divorced.



Photo: Sunset in Olga Bay, AM571

There are a variety of Alutiiq words that can be used to describe divorce. For example, *peglluku* means to let go. Another term, *uniyulluku* means they left each other. This word comes from the root *unite-* and means to be left behind; to be left over; or to remain.

In classical Alutiiq society divorce was possible, but not common. A spouse was a critical partner in the life-long work of procuring resources and housing, clothing, and feeding a family. As such, the value of this partnership was stressed and respected. An Alutiiq legend tells of a man who slowly abandoned his wife and children. The man fails to provide for his family and eventually leaves home never to return. The wife and children suffer hunger as they wait for him. When the wife discovers that her husband is selfishly caring for a new family, she transforms herself into a bear and kills him. This story reminds listeners of the importance of marriage to the health of a family and its members.

In classical Alutiiq society, when a couple decided to split, one spouse simply moved out of the house. As groups of related women and their families lived together, the husband typically left and the wife and any children stayed. Following this departure, the estranged spouses were free to remarry. In more recent times, when each nuclear family had their own home, either spouse might leave. This left both single women and single men to raise children. However, remarriage could be difficult. Those who practiced the Russian Orthodox faith were bound by church rules governing the acceptable circumstances for divorce.

Abandonment also ended marriages. In the historic era, some unscrupulous non-Native men combatted loneliness by marrying Native women. Some of these marriages lasted. Others did not. Some of the men had families elsewhere and eventually returned to them. Others abandoned their Alutiiq wives and children when they left jobs as cannery caretakers and fishermen and moved away.