Alutiiq angyaq inducted into Alaska Innovators Hall of Fame

Before there were pick-up trucks, there was the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq angyaq (open boats). Crafted explicitly for heavy seas, and mass transportation, and made from local materials, these historic skin-covered boats were used in Sugpiaq society for harvesting and traveling. Angyaq were owned by families.

The Alaska State Committee on Research honors the creativity, traditional ecological knowledge, and craftsmanship of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq angyaq and inducts these large open boats into the Alaska Innovators Hall of Fame class of 2020.

“It was import to us that this ingenious watercraft to be recognized and remembered,” said Dr. April Laktonen Counceller, Executive Director for the Alutiiq Museum. “The boat, and growing knowledge of its manufacture, are symbolic of our community’s journey. Just as angyat carried many people, the journey to relearn angyaq construction has been a community experience, with many people involved.”

While it’s unknown when angyat were first invented, archaeological finds from the Alutiiq village of Karluk suggest these boats are at least 400 years old. The construction of angyat was suppressed during the Russian conquest of Kodiak. Fur traders confiscated and destroyed angyat as a way to make it difficult for Sugpiaq communities to gather, flee subjugation, and/or retaliate. Consequently, knowledge of these boats and their construction faded from living memory.

“I marvel at the angyaq design,” said Dr. Sven Haakanson Jr., a Sugpiaq artist and scholar. “The Indigenous people were engineers ahead of their time. It got me thinking about what else are we are missing from the Sugpiaq community that we can use today to help us sustain our world.”

Now, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people are reawakening the art of angyaq building. craftsmen have taken inspiration from their ancestors, examined boat parts recovered from archaeological sites and only 15 models found in museum collections, and are recreating angyat. These boats are constructed following traditional methods of transforming driftwood, sinew, and hide into large, nimble watercraft by using contemporary materials.

Originally one angyaq had benches for up to 20 paddlers and were between 30 to 40 feet long. An angyaq frame is made from local driftwood with specific wood selected for the different parts. In the past craftsmen split the wood with stone tools, splitting adzes and whale bone wedges. Each element of an angyaq was then shaped with finer carving tools using planing adzes, chisels, and knives made from
shells, beaver, marmot and porcupine incisors. The pieces are lashed together and traditionally finished with sea lion skins that had been dehaired, sewn together with waterproof stitches, and oiled.

“There are a lot of lessons we are relearning as we go,” said Dr. Haakanson. “It’s a bit of a challenge to reverse engineer design from a model, but we figured it out. Now we are sharing this knowledge with others so we don’t have to reinvent the wheel again.”

Perhaps the most ingenious feature of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq angyaq’s design is its bulbous bow, a feature that decreases the amount of force needed to propel the boat forward. The large disk-like projection on the lower part of the bow rests just below the waterline. It adds buoyancy, increases stability, and reduces drag by changing the flow of water around the boat.

This design was adopted by Alutiiq/Sugpiaq craftsmen centuries ago to ensure stability in Kodiak’s notoriously rough waters. During World War I, U.S. Naval architects adopted a similar shape to the angyaq’s bulbous bow, which is now considered the standard in ship design around the world.

Dr. Haakanson is leading much of the work to revive the art of building angyat. With help from students and volunteers, he constructed two angyat that were successfully launched in the ocean in 2016. Other craftsmen like Teacon Simeonoff and Andrew Abyo, are learning the art by making models.

The Alutiiq Museum is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and culture of the Alutiiq, an Alaska Native tribal people. Representatives of Kodiak Alutiiq organizations govern the museum with funding from charitable contributions, memberships, grants, contracts, and sales.

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