Kodiak Tribes Rebury Ancestral Remains

This morning, June 1, 2018, the Sun’aq Tribe of Kodiak and the Native Village of Tangirnaq reburied the remains of at least 122 ancestors. The remains were taken from historic and prehistoric graves in the Kodiak Archipelago. Some were collected by researchers and spent decades in university collections. Others were cared for by the Alutiiq Museum, returned by collectors for tribal care. The Alutiiq Museum facilitated the reburial process, working with tribal leaders and the US Fish & Wildlife Service to identify tribal affiliations, repatriate the remains, and lay Alutiiq people to rest. The City of Kodiak generously provided and prepared a grave site in the city cemetery.

Most of the remains came from an historic Russian Orthodox Church cemetery on Chirikof Island. Associated with the village of Ukamok, the cemetery eroded in the early 1960s and researchers collected the remains of more than 103 people from the adjacent beach. Church records indicate that the cemetery was used till about 1870. They also name the individuals interred. Surnames like Alokli, Ignatin, and Melovidov link some of the deceased to members of today’s Alutiiq community. Other remains came from ancient settlements on Chirikof Island and in the Chiniak Bay region. Alutiiq Museum Executive Director April Counceller explains.

“Decades ago there was a fascination with Native American graves and funeral practices, which led to museums and archaeologists collecting both artifacts and human remains for study—usually without permission from the Native community. Thankfully this is no longer acceptable. For the past fifteen years, the Alutiiq Museum and Kodiak region tribes have been working to locate these ancestors and bring them home under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a federal law. Today’s ceremony is a step in this ongoing effort, and a chance for community healing.”

At the cemetery, tribal members Sharon Wolkoff and her grandson Damien Allen Madrid held an Orthodox cross by the grave. Frank Peterson, chairman of the Sun’aq Tribe of Kodiak, welcomed those gathered and introduced a memorial performance by the Kodiak
Alutiiq Dancers. The dancers shared two songs, both intended to connect with ancestors, especially those being laid to rest. Archpriest Innocent Dresdow of Kodiak’s Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Cathedral led a private Panikhida service, a blessing with hymns and prayers for the departed with help from an Orthodox choir. Alutiiq Elders, tribal representatives, descendants of the Chirikof Island community, and people who assisted with the repatriation and reburial attended. At the conclusion of the service, people paid their respects at the graveside. Each Alutiiq Elder took a turn scattering roses and dirt, followed by others in attendance.

The event was a poignant reminder of the mistreatment of Alutiiq ancestral remains, but it was also a relief for tribal members. Knowing that community members were waiting to be reclaimed weighed heavily on many people, and the opportunity to correct this injustice brought both tears and comfort. The ceremony itself was blessed with sunshine and a pleasant breeze and it provided a solemn, peaceful way for those in attendance to end the disruptive journey their ancestors have experienced.

“This story is hard for us to share because it involves our ancestors’ bones,” said Counseller, “but we need others to know about this—and to recognize that other tribes have hundreds of thousands of unreturned remains, twenty-eight years after the passage of NAGPRA. This is one reason we are establishing a memorial.”

The reburial occurred just five hours before a groundbreaking ceremony for Ancestors’ Memorial Park, a public space created to honor the Alutiiq people and their heritage. The park will be developed this summer on a .34-acre parcel in downtown Kodiak adjacent to the Alutiiq Museum. It will be a place for contemplation and education. Counseller said that it will include messages about historic preservation, information designed to keep Alutiiq remains, settlements, and artifacts from disrespectful treatment.

“There is a good deal of repatriation work yet to complete,” she said. “Hopefully, the park will help to build respect for our people and our history—and to protect our heritage still buried in Kodiak’s soil. Perhaps one day we will not have to repatriate any more of our dead.”

According to Alutiiq Museum Chief Curator Amy Steffian, “The park’s message will be simple. Respect the past. If you find a site, an artifact, or human remains, don’t disturb them. Look but don’t take.” In the case of inadvertent discovery of human remains, Steffian said, “human remains should always be reported to the Troopers. That’s the law and the Troopers do an excellent job of working with the Alutiiq Museum to ensure that ancestral remains are identified and treated with respect.”

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.