

Lliilercipet – OUR NATIVE DANCING TRADITION

Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq dance has a rich history. Through the late 19th century, the Alutiiq hosted vibrant winter festivals in large community houses. Here, people visited, ate, listened to storytellers, played games, and danced. There were different types of dances. Some were for entertainment. These performances told stories, provided a show for audience members to watch and join, or celebrated the achievements of a young person. Other dances were ceremonial. They helped performers communicate with powerful spirits to ensure hunting success and send messages to ancestors.

Today, Kodiak Alutiiq dance is a vibrant cultural practice, but just a few decades ago, it was at risk of being lost. Because of the relationship between traditional dancing and spirituality, Christian churches saw dancing as a threat and suppressed the practice. Some people continued to dance in secret, hiking into the mountains to maintain their connection to the spirit world without interference. By the early 20th century, dancing was no longer passed down, and the practice stopped completely.

Alutiiq people's love for dancing never faded. Western-style dance was very popular in rural communities. People gathered at tribal halls or homes for community dances, where they enjoyed polkas, schottisches, the jitterbug, and many other dances. Yet many Alutiiq people wanted to perform their own dances.

In the 1980s, an Alutiiq dance revival began. Elder Larry Matfay of Akhiok led the formation of Cuumillat'stun—Like Our Ancestors, the first professional Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq dance group. Cuumillat'stun's original members included representatives from each of the island's Alutiiq communities. Together they performed the first publicly shared traditional dances in over a century, learned to make traditional drums and regalia, and paved the way for other dance groups. The Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers formed in 1987 and continue to perform today. Many of Kodiak's rural villages also have dance groups.



*Connie Chya and Larry Matfay performing an Alutiiq dance, ca. 1995.
Rostad Collection.*



LISTEN:

Watch a short film about the history of Alutiiq dance on the Alutiiq Museum website at

<https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/the-alutiiq-sugpiaq-people/cultural-arts/dancing>

Cauyaq – DRUM



*Skin covered drum, Kodiak Island, 1872,
Pinart Collection, Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.*

In the traditional Alutiiq language, the word for drum and music are the same—*cauyaq*. This duplication illustrates the importance of drums to traditional Alutiiq/Sugpiaq music. Although Alutiiq people also perform with rattles and whistles, the drum, with its penetrating beat, is their main instrument.

Drumming is an ancient practice. Prehistoric petroglyphs from both Afognak and Kodiak Islands show people holding drums, and archaeological sites with well-preserved wooden artifacts include drum handles and drum rims many hundreds of years old. Historic accounts also indicate that drumming was an important part of the Alutiiq past. Until the late 19th century, Alutiiq people sang and danced in honor of ancestors, reenacted stories, shared community history, and called spirits to their winter festivals to the rhythmic pulse of skin drums.

MAKING DRUMS

Like the drums of Yup'ik and Inupiaq peoples, Alutiiq drums are large, circular instruments designed for individual players. Made in many sizes, Alutiiq drums have unique features. Each has a large wooden hoop made from a narrow, oval-shaped piece of wood bent to shape with steam. To close the hoop, carvers drill holes in the end of the wood strip and lash the ends together. To this frame, some artists attach a cross brace, a piece of wood that provides extra support.

Next, drum makers stretch a bear lung, a seal bladder, or even a halibut stomach over the hoop to form the drum's cover. They secure the edges of the skin by tying it to a thin groove that encircles the outside edge of the wooden hoop. The last step is to lash on a sturdy handle. Each handle features a notch to hold the drum rim, with a beautifully carved image on the inside.

Like other ceremonial objects, Alutiiq people decorated their drums. A drum's skin might be painted with images of spirit helpers, or its handle painted and adorned with carvings of people or animals. A prehistoric drum handle from Karluk shows a human face inset with two tiny animal teeth. Some drum handles had tiny masks attached. These carvings faced the audience as the drummer played.

Cauyaq nitniq'gkiu.

- Listen to the drum.

Alutiiq people beat their drums with a rounded stick called *kaugsuun*—"something for hitting." The drummer controls the tone of his instrument by varying the location and intensity of his strike. Sometimes he may hit the rim of the drum, other times its skin surface.

A musician can also change the sound of a drum by altering the tightness of its skin cover. Drum skins are sensitive to moisture. By wetting the skin, the cover loosens, creating a deeper sound. Hold the drum near the fire and the warmth dries the skin, causing it to constrict and the tone of the instrument to rise. Today, some Alaskan drummers carry spray bottles to fine-tune their instruments during performances.

LISTEN:

Generations, An Alutiiq Music Collection, 2007,
CD produced by Stephen Blanchett for the Alutiiq
Museum, Kodiak.

Atuutet – SONGS

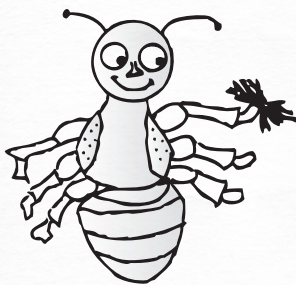


Singing is a favorite pastime in Alutiiq/Sugpiaq communities. People of all ages enjoy sharing a tune or learning a melody from an Elder. In addition to expressing emotion, songs are a form of storytelling. They record community history and express values. There are many different types of songs. Today people share everything from country and western tunes to Orthodox hymns, but they also remember traditional verses sung for hunting, curing illness, praising ancestors, dancing, and visiting. Many of these songs once helped Alutiiq people obtain assistance from the spirits that influenced life on earth. Powerful Alutiiq whalers sang songs to control the movement of an injured whale. Hunters learned animal songs to attract game. Shamans used songs to drive away illness caused by evil.

Kas'aq amlesqanek atuutnek nallun'ituq. - THE SPIRITUAL LEADER KNOWS MANY SONGS.

In classical Alutiiq society, singing was also a central part of winter festivals. The host of such gatherings hired a spiritual leader (*kas'aq*) to guide the festivities. Well versed in traditional songs and ceremonial etiquette, this person used songs to move guests from the everyday world into a mystical realm. With singing, people welcomed spirits to the gathering, honored them, and appealed for aid. Alutiiq people also sang to venerate ancestors. A forebearer might be memorialized with a mask and a specially written tune. Men also paired masks and songs to tell stories—to remember a great hunt, to recount a battle, or to share family history.

Neresta, the song presented below is about a louse that annoys a group of steam bathers. Today, the Kodiak Alutiiq dancers perform a comical rendition of this song, with washing and scratching motions.



NERESTA

*Neresta taarimallria /
Taairipaguarluni /
Inggim yaamat ciqiluki, /
neresta atunguaruarluni.*

*The louse whisked himself. /
He whisked himself long and hard [showing off] /
The baby louse [nit] splashed water on the rocks. /
And the louse sang to his little self [for the heck of it].*



*A Kodiak Alutiiq dancer performs with hand motions.
Alutiiq Museum Archives. Photo by Sven Haakanson, Jr.*



Nacaq – HEADDRESS



JJ Orloff models a nacaq made by June Simeonoff Pardue. Purchased for the Alutiiq Museum with support from the Rasmuson Art Acquisition Fund.

Headdresses were once part of the elaborate clothing worn at Alutiiq/Sugpiaq winter festivals. Participants in these events displayed their prosperity with beautifully crafted garments. The materials and decorative elements used in clothing reflected their wearer's age, gender, and social position. Wealthy Alutiiq people wore elegantly decorated parkas of valuable sea otter, fox, or ground squirrel pelts. Headdresses, jewelry, and tattoos added to the appearance of prestige conveyed by these rich materials. The less affluent wore simple clothing of common materials like bird skins. Whatever your status, your clothes provided a link to the spiritual world. Alutiiq people kept their garments clean, well repaired, and nicely decorated to show respect for the creatures that supported human life.

Women's headdresses were typically made from hundreds of glass beads strung on sinew and embellished with feathers colored with cranberry or blueberry juice. Strands of small beads were tied into a tight-fitting cap with many dangling lengths attached to the sides and the back. These attachments often featured larger, heavier beads that swayed, glittered, and jingled as the wearer moved. In Prince William Sound, the daughters of Alutiiq chiefs wore headdresses of

beads and dentalium shells that extended far down their bodies, sometimes reaching their heels. Beaded headdresses were often accompanied by matching earrings, chokers, necklaces, and belts. Teenage girls and young women wore these lavish ornaments to symbolize their passage into adulthood.

Men also wore headdresses. These garments were hood-shaped, and though they might include beads, they lacked the long strings associated with women's *nacaq*. Some were made of ermine skins, decorated with feathers, pieces of animal hair, strips of leather and gut skin, and embellished with embroidery.

Today, headdresses remain a part of traditional dress. Alutiiq people wear them for performances, events, and special occasions.

LEARN MORE:

Nacaq, How to Make a Kodiak Alutiiq Beaded Headdress, 2022, by Kayla McDermott, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.



PisiRkat (N): Pinguat – BEADS

Makut pinguat cucunartut. – THESE BEADS ARE BEAUTIFUL.

Before the availability of European goods, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people embellished their clothing and jewelry with a variety of handmade beads. Pieces of shell, bone, ivory, amber, coal, slate, and even halibut vertebrae were fashioned into decorations for parkas, raingear, headdresses, hunting hats, bags, and labrets. In Prince William Sound, people made shiny beads from unbaked clay mixed with seal oil, and on the Kenai Peninsula, they carved beads from soft red shale. A necklace collected in Kodiak in the 19th century, features hundreds of tiny bird claws set into each other to form small loops, like beads.

Some shells were particularly coveted for decoration. Alutiiq people obtained dentalium shells, the curved, white, tusk-shaped shells of scaphopods, in trade with the societies of Southeast Alaska. They used these graceful shells as beads to decorate clothing and as earrings and nose pins. They were considered extremely valuable. Historic sources indicate that a pair of delicate dentalium shells could be traded for an entire squirrel skin parka.

By 1840, trade goods from Asia and Europe began reaching Alaska in large quantities, supplied by merchants in Siberian ports and Hudson's Bay Company outposts in the United States and western Canada. Russian colonists hoarded the finer goods—porcelains, iron tools, and gunflints—for their own use, but traded food and trinkets to the Alutiiq. Traders used inexpensive commodities like glass beads to pay Alutiiq hunters for valuable sea otter hides resold in distant markets.

Manufactured in Asian and European factories, colorful glass beads were cheap, easy to ship, and coveted by Native peoples. On Kodiak, these brightly colored beads fit well into the prestige-based economy and were widely incorporated into ancestral arts—like the production of headdresses. The Cornaline d'Alleppo, a dark red bead made in Venice, was particularly prized, perhaps as its color resembled traditional red pigments.

LEARN MORE:

Cultural Arts—Beading, <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/the-alutiiq-sugpiaq-people/cultural-arts/beading>



Detail of glass beads in an Alutiiq beaddress, Afognak Island, 1872, Pinart Collection, Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. Photo by Will Anderson.



Giinaruat – MASKS



Nayurta – The Watchman.
Nineteenth century wooden mask from the Pinart Collection,
Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.
Photo by Will Anderson.

Masking is an ancient Alutiiq/Sugpiaq tradition. For centuries, Native artists carved images of powerful ancestors, animal spirits, and mythological beings into wood and bark. Masks were made in many sizes. Palm-sized miniatures may have been used to teach children traditional stories, attached to drums, or carried by adults as amulets. Dancers wore full-sized portrait masks and enormous plank masks during ceremonial performances.

Masks were often brightly painted and adorned with a variety of attachments. Feathers, fur, and small wooden carvings were tied to an encircling hoop. Some masks were held in the hands or teeth. Others were tied to the dancer's head, and very large pieces may have been suspended over performance areas. A long-headed mask was a sign of power and authority. A whistling mask could conjure spirits.

Following ceremonies, masks were broken and discarded. This tradition reflects the spiritual power of the images they portrayed. Masks were part of the dangerous process of communicating with the spirit world. They were used in dances that ensured future hunting success by showing reverence to animal spirits and ancestors.

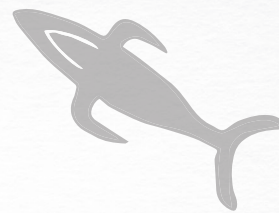
Masking continues in Alutiiq communities today, where it has been combined with Russian Orthodox and American traditions. During Russian New Year, Alutiiq people participate in an annual masquerade ball. Some people disguised with masks and odd clothing, travel from house to house dancing. Hosts provide refreshments and try to guess the identity of their visitors, who must quit for the night if they are identified. This modern practice holds many elements of ancient winter ceremonies—visiting, performing, and feasting.

While Elders today remember the older word *giinaquq*, most today use the words *giinaruaq* (like a face) and *maaskaag* (borrowed from Russian) for *mask*.

LEARN MORE:

Giinaquq: Like A Face, Sugpiaq Masks from the Kodiak Archipelago, 2009, by Sven Haakanson, Jr. and Amy Steffian. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.

Quliyanguat – STORIES



Quliyanguiciiqaken. – I WILL TELL YOU A STORY.

At day break a whale came to the surface and swam towards the shore. The tide was low and the waterfall was up some ways from the sea. The boy wondered how it could get up there to drink. As he watched, the whale slowly shoved its head up the beach and opened its mouth and a little man, with a leather bucket in each hand, came out and went up to the waterfall. He filled the buckets with water and went back down and into the whale's mouth. The whale closed its mouth and turned out to sea and disappeared.

Story collected from Ralph Demidoff, from Desson 1995:39.

Among societies without a written language, storytelling is an important way to record history. Events, accomplishments, values, spiritual beliefs, and even survival techniques are passed from generation to generation through people rather than books.

Although many people practiced storytelling, in the past, each Alutiiq community had at least one ritual specialist. Known as a *kas'aq*, this person had an expert knowledge of stories, songs, and dances. He led traditional ceremonies and helped to educate children.

Traditional Alutiiq/Sugpiaq tales held many lessons. Stories (*quliyanguat*) recounted the pursuits of ancestors, explained unusual events, and discussed community history. Legends (*unigkuat*) explained the cosmos—the origin of people, the stars, and the animals. The Man of Winter, a story told to noisy children, warned that those who misbehave may cause bad weather. Children learned that poor behavior can have consequences for an entire community. The Thirsty Whale story reveals the Alutiiq belief that every creature has a human-like consciousness, represented by a small person that lives inside of it. Whalers told such stories when training their apprentices.



Petroglyphs from Cape Alitak, Kodiak Island. From a drawing by Sven Haakanson, Jr.



LEARN MORE:

Unigkuat—Kodiak Alutiiq Legends, 2018, edited by Dehrich Chya and Amy F. Steffian, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

Alutiit Kraas'kait – ALUTIIQ COLORS



The world's societies interpret colors in different ways. The Alutiiq language has just four basic color terms: *Kawirtuq* (it is red), *Tan'ertuq/Tamlertuq* (it is black), *Qatertuq/Qat'rtuq* (it is white), and *Cungagtuq* (it is blue). Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people recognized a broader range of colors, but their traditional language describes most hues with these four terms. For example, green is a shade of blue. Alutiiq speakers also describe colors by their similarity to common things. For example, an Alutiiq speaker might say that a brown object is the color of dirt.

IT IS RED – *KAWIRTUQ*

Alutiiq people manufactures red pigments from minerals and plants. They ground ochre, a soft, naturally occurring iron oxide, into a fine powder and mixed it with oil to make paint. On Kodiak, people produced a reddish-brown dye by boiling alder bark. In Prince William Sound, people boiled hemlock bark or a mixture of cranberry and blueberry juices to produce a dark red dye. Widely used in body painting and to decorate objects, the color red may represent ancestral blood.

IT IS BLACK – *TAN'ERTUQ/TAMLERTUQ*

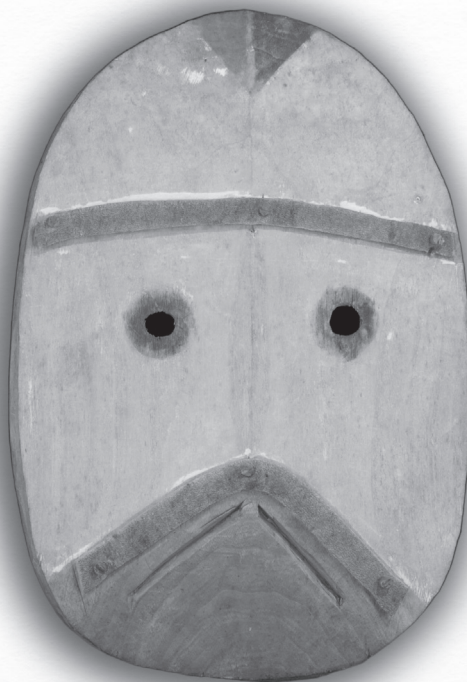
Historic sources indicate that Alutiiq people collected a specific stone to make black pigment. They also produced black pigment from a copper ore and from wood charcoal. With black paint Alutiiq people painted faces, particularly of people in mourning. Black paint also adorned masks, both as a background color and as a design component. Black paint often outlines facial features or illustrates brows and eyes.

IT IS WHITE – *QATERTUQ/QAT'RTUQ*

Alutiiq people made white pigment from limestone obtained in trade with the Alaska mainland, grinding this soft rock into a powder and mixing it with oil to create paint. At winter hunting festivals, the faces of the first two dance performers were often painted white and red, and masks were often decorated with white.

IT IS BLUE – *CUNGAGTUQ*

To the Alutiiq, blue is a powerful color. It is associated with the supernatural, particularly the worlds below the sea. Blue pigment was never used in body painting. However, a blue-green paint adorned hunting hats, and whalers, the magical hunters who pursued giant sea mammals, carried blue or green stones.



*Payulik—Bringer of Food, painted wood and leather mask, Pinart Collection, Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.
Photo by Will Anderson.*