

Nunallret – ANCESTRAL VILLAGES



In classical Alutiiq/Sugpiaq society people lived in large coastal villages. These settlements were prominently located, often at the mouths of Kodiak's major rivers or on points of land where inhabitants could watch for sea mammals and monitor the movements of other people. Additional requirements included a source of fresh water and a beach suitable for landing skin boats.

Villages ranged in size from small summer fishing camps with a cluster of sod houses to large winter settlement with many dwellings. Archaeological data illustrate that some villages had as many as 70 houses. Russian accounts suggest that an extended family of about 18 people lived in each house and that household residents were related to each other through women. For example, a pair of sisters might share a house, living together with their husbands, children, and perhaps other relatives. Women also held leadership positions through their roles as healers—*sungca'istet*, midwives—*paapuskaat*, and shamans—*kalla'alet*.

Although living arrangements centered around women, men were community leaders. Each major settlement had a set of political and religious specialists, including a chief—*angaynuqag*, a second chief—*sakaasiik*, a ritual specialist—*kas'ag*, and at least one shaman—*kalla'alek*. The position of chief was inherited, and gradually passed down to a son, brother, cousin, or nephew by an aging leader.

Some powerful chiefs oversaw the political business of several villages, and many maintained special community houses known as a *qasgiq*. In these very large sod structures men of all ages met to discuss village business, plan war parties, and lead winter ceremonies honoring their ancestors.

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Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule, 2008, by Sonja Luehrmann, University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.

Sod houses and fish drying racks in Old Harbor, ca. 1889. Albatross Collection, National Archives.

