

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.*



WATCH:

Find a short film about the history of Alutiiq dance on the Alutiiq Museum website at <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/alutiiq-people/art/arts-blog/dancing/>