

Pisucillpet – HUNTING TRADITIONS



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THEY HUNT WHALES WITH POISON SPEARS.

Among the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people, whaling was a dangerous activity, shrouded in secrecy and steeped in magic. Whalers were a special class of hunters, who lived apart from everyday society. They were considered dangerous, more like spiritual entities than human beings, for their ability to land enormous sea mammals. The title of whaler was hereditary and passed through certain elite families. Each whaler maintained a secret cave where he stored hunting gear and prepared for the chase. Here he acted out hunts with model kayaks and prepared deadly hunting poisons.

The pulverized root of the monkshood plant (Latin: *Aconitum delphinifolium*), an herb with many blue, helmet-shaped flowers, was a central ingredient in these poisons. This plant contains a powerful toxin that can paralyze the nervous system and dangerously lower body temperature and blood pressure.

Whalers added spiritually powerful human fat to this chemically potent plant. On Kodiak, fat was taken from the mummified remains of whalers, or stolen from the remains of a male child. When spread on whaling lances, this magical poison was strong enough to paralyze small whales and keep them from fleeing into open water.

In addition to poisoned spears, whalers carried amulets. Talismans included eagle feathers, bear hair, berries, roots, and luminous green stones. These charms were collected privately and each hunter stored his charms in a small bag or box. A story from Afognak Island tells of the great success of a whaler who found a green stone. However, when the hunter fell in love and lost the stone, he could no longer kill game. He and his beloved died shortly afterwards.



*Whaling petroglyph, Cape Alitak,
Kodiak Island.*