

# Alutiit Nallunilngut – ALUTIIQ SPECIALISTS



The knowledge needed to make a living in Kodiak’s wet, windy environment is vast and sophisticated. To stay warm, make tools, build houses, and feed a family, all people must have a detailed understanding of the environment and how to harvest and use resources. Beyond this knowledge communities also need people with specialized training. In classical Alutiiq/Sugpiaq society, chiefs, whalers, ritual leaders, healers, and shamans were among those with unique knowledge and duties. Some of their positions were passed down through families. Others were taught to people who showed an aptitude for certain work.

Learning the job of a cultural specialist involved apprenticeship. Young people worked with an experienced mentor to study skills like resolving disputes, predicting the weather, or preparing herbal medicines. In a story about a boy who apprentices a whaler, the boy is assigned tasks, taught about hunting rituals and animal behavior, put in challenging situations that test his courage, and instructed to learn from watching quietly. Observation was critical to acquiring skills.

Among the cultural specialists, *kas’at* functioned as spiritual leaders. These highly respected wise men were tradition bearers, trained in all aspects of ceremonial life. They were revered for their cultural knowledge and ability to work with helpful spirits. Questions about proper behavior were often referred to a spiritual leader. They instructed children in traditional songs and organized festivals. A family hosting a gathering hired a spiritual leader to lead the festivities, compose songs for the event, and ensure they followed proper protocols for everything from seating guests to giving gifts. Today, people use the word *kas’aq* to mean priest.

In contrast with spiritual leaders, *kalla’alet*—shamans were intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Shamans interacted with spirits to heal the sick, predict the future, control weather, and observe events in far-off places. They could turn themselves into animals or send their souls to find lost people. This involved the dangerous task of communicating with animals, ancestors, and supernatural beings.



From left: “Grandma W.” or Georgia Stream, Natalie Farsovich, Stephanida Iagosba (midwife), Alocalli (midwife), Shelikof (midwife), and Mary Agnot, Akhiok, 1928. Courtesy the National Archives.

*Iluligaartet*—healers helped the physically ill by diagnosing and treating illness. These specialists worked with their hands to locate sickness and used herbs, steam baths, and touch as therapies. They were also skilled midwives, trained in prenatal care and delivery. In addition to learning skills from older women, a healer’s knowledge was thought to be a spiritual gift.