



## **Rematriating the Archipelago: A Gendered Environmental History of Kodiak**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper draws on Alutiiq oral legends and histories to craft a gendered environmental history of the Kodiak Archipelago from the perspective of Alutiiq women, examining their relationships with the island environment and their roles within it. Alutiiq women were stripped of their autonomy over their reproductive and environmental roles under Russian and American colonization. However, Alutiiq values, including Nunapet, Nunapet Carliarluki, and Unguwacirpet, endured, linking women's physical health to land stewardship. Alutiiq women historically led hunting festivals, prepared fish and skins, and controlled their reproductive lives through breastfeeding and midwifery. Today, Alutiiq women reclaim environmental values through crafts and birthing practices, embodying what Cutcha Risling Baldy calls "(re)righting and (re)riteing Indigenous epistemologies." Their survival and revival demonstrate how Alutiiq women resisted colonialism and sustained reciprocal relationships with the environment.*



**Keywords:** reciprocity, Alutiiq women, subsistence practices, reproductive health / practices, environment

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## Resumé

*Cet article s'appuie sur les légendes orales et les histoires des Alutiiq pour élaborer une histoire environnementale genrée de l'archipel Kodiak du point de vue des femmes Alutiiq, en examinant leurs relations avec l'environnement insulaire et leurs rôles en son sein. Sous la colonisation russe et américaine, les femmes Alutiiq ont été privées de leur autonomie sur leurs rôles reproducteurs et environnementaux. Cependant, les valeurs d'Alutiiq, dont Nunapet, Nunapet Carliarluki et Unguwacirpet, ont perduré, continuant à lier la santé physique des femmes à l'intendance des terres. Historiquement, les femmes Alutiiq dirigeaient les festivals de chasse, préparaient poissons et peaux, et contrôlaient leur vie reproductive par l'allaitement et la maternité. Aujourd'hui, les femmes d'Alutiiq reprennent possession des valeurs environnementales à travers l'artisanat et les pratiques d'accouchement, incarnant ce que Cutcha Risling Baldy appelle « (re)righting and (re)riteing Indigenous epistemologies » (rétablir les droits et les rites des épistémologies autochtones). La survie et la renaissance de ces épistémologies démontrent comment les femmes d'Alutiiq ont résisté au colonialisme et maintenu des relations réciproques avec l'environnement.*

**Mots-clés :** réciprocité, femmes Alutiiq, pratiques de subsistance, santé / pratiques reproductives, environnement

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## INTRODUCTION

The Kodiak Archipelago is made up of twenty-five islands, covers 5,360 square miles of land, and is home to forty small glaciers; it lies 250 miles southwest of Anchorage in the Gulf of Alaska along the Katmai coast. These geographical facts accurately describe the location, but do not reflect how the Alutiiq, who have called Kodiak home for over 7,500 years, understand place, environment, and history. A better summation of Kodiak comes from the statement, "This is the land that we belong to, not the land that belongs to us."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alisha Susana Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun—We Are Learning How to be Sugpiaq: Exploring Kodiak Alutiiq Literature Through Core Values*, PhD diss. (University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2012), 150.

Shared by an Alutiiq elder and recorded by Alutiiq literary scholar Alisha Susana Drabek, this statement captures a relational understanding of the land that cannot be conveyed through geographic descriptions alone.

This article explores the environmental history of the Kodiak Archipelago through the experiences of Kodiak Alutiiq women. The Indigenous peoples of Kodiak are referred to in historical and contemporary sources in several different ways. *Sugpiaq* — an Alutiiq term meaning ‘real people’ — was the precolonial self-designation Indigenous people on Kodiak used, while *Alutiiq* is an indigenized version of the term ‘Aleut,’ which Russian colonizers broadly applied to refer to all Indigenous peoples of Southwest Alaska.<sup>2</sup> Both Alutiiq and Sugpiaq are popular self-designators on Kodiak today, and Alutiiq is also used to describe the language. In this article, I will use *Alutiiq* and *Alutiit* to refer to the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of the Alutiit on Kodiak are preserved in oral traditions passed down through generations, documented through elder recordings, and in accounts shared with explorers, anthropologists, students, and folklorists; it was later compiled by the Alutiiq Museum and Repository scholars into a collective volume.<sup>4</sup> Storytelling plays a central role in Kodiak Alutiiq culture, serving to pass down knowledge and share cultural worldviews. Alutiiq oral traditions include *quliyanguat*, life or history-based stories, and *unigkuat*, legends and origin narratives.<sup>5</sup> These stories describe journeys from mainland Alaska to Kodiak and emphasize the decision to settle based on the island’s abundance, naming it *Qik’rtaq* (island).<sup>6</sup>

When human people arrived in the archipelago over 7,500 years ago, they encountered a maritime environment defined by ocean and rugged coastlines, jagged mountains rising

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2 *Kodiak Alutiiq Language Textbook*, edited by April Isiik G. L. Counciller, Ph.D., and Dehrich Isuwiq Chya, M.A., with Peggy Arnangcuk Azuyak, M.A., Michael Nanit’sqaq Bach, M.A., Candace Cutmen Branson, M.A., Alisha Agisaq Drabek, Ph.D., and Tonya Iwa’ista Heitman, J.D. (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 2; Amy F. Steffian, ‘Alutiit Quliyangua’it Patuirluki: Uncovering Alutiiq History,’ in *Imaken Ima’ut—From the Future to the Present: Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq History*, ed. Amy F. Steffian (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 2.

3 Alutiit is the plural form of Alutiiq. Amy F. Steffian and April G. Laktonen Counciller, *Alutiiq Traditions: An Introduction to the Native Culture of the Kodiak Archipelago*, 5th ed. (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2022), 3.

4 Dehrich Chya and Amy F. Steffian, eds., *Unigkuat: Kodiak Alutiiq Legends*, with contributions by April G. L. Counciller and Alisha S. Drabek (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2021), xxv.

5 Chya and Steffian, *Unigkuat*, 3.

6 Chya and Steffian, *Unigkuat*, 5; ‘Island - Qik’rtaq,’ *Alutiiq Word of the Week*, Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://alutiqmuseum.org/collection/index.php/Detail/word/297>. *Qik’rtarmiut*, meaning ‘people of the island,’ is another name for the Kodiak Alutiit.

from low fog, glaciers flowing into salmon-filled rivers, and forests of Black cottonwood trees. Kelp lined the shoreline, supporting sea otter, fish, and bird populations, while pebble beaches, tide pools, and sheltered coves formed small ecosystems along the coast. Puffins flew above the water with their lifelong mates, humpback whales breached the surface offshore, and Kodiak bears foraged for salmonberries and wild blueberries beneath the forest canopy. This is Kodiak Island, still known to the Alutiit as their environment and home. Alutiiq communities historically organized their lives around environmental patterns, living in winter villages and relocating to salmon camps during the summer. Their reciprocally-focused relationship with the land and water shaped social and spiritual life. Key to this relationship were Kodiak Alutiiq women, whose labour and knowledge underpinned community survival and continuity. Despite Russian and American imperial challenges, this relationship persisted and remains important to Alutiiq women's identity today.

This article traces that relationship from the precolonial period through the era of Russian colonization beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the American period following the 1867 purchase of Alaska, and into the twentieth century and the present day. Across these periods, Kodiak Alutiiq communities encountered social and ecological disruptions, including village consolidation, epidemic disease, ecological degradation, missionization, industrial fishing, military occupation, natural disasters, and oil contamination.<sup>7</sup> These events reshaped Alutiiq relationships with the land and water, but did not eliminate them because the Alutiit People persevered to maintain them.

Centreing Kodiak Alutiiq women, this article examines how subsistence labour, healing and reproductive knowledge, and cultural responsibilities structured reciprocal relationships between people and the environment. Alutiiq women played central roles in gathering and processing foods, crafting clothes and tools, managing household and communal resources, and engaging in seasonal ceremonial and spiritual practices. Women's reproductive and healing practices, including contraception, plant medicine, feminine hygiene, tracking ovulation, tracking menstrual cycles, midwifery, and childrearing, as well as the biological functions of women's reproductive systems such as

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<sup>7</sup> For more scholarship on these disruptions on Kodiak, see: April Isiik Laktonen Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' in *Imaken Ima'ut—From the Future to the Present: Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq History*, ed. Amy F. Steffian (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 104-174; Dehrich Isuwiq Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata: When the Russians Arrived,' in *Imaken Ima'ut—From the Future to the Present: Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq History*, ed. Amy F. Steffian (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 74-104; Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 3-4, 139-141, 151-153; Ryan Tucker Jones, *Empire of Extinction: Russians and the North Pacific's Strange Beasts of the Sea, 1741–1867* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 97; Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80, 94-95.

menstruation and breastfeeding, were deeply entrenched in environmental wisdom and collective well-being, positioning women as mediators between land and the community.

Russian and American colonial regimes disrupted these relationships through the extraction of women's labour, a restructuring of domestic life, the regulation of women's health, and the promotion of economic systems oriented towards environmental exploitation. This article argues that, despite the Russian and American colonial structures that constrained Alutiiq women's choices, Alutiiq women adjusted to these circumstances by maintaining subsistence practices, preserving reproductive and healing knowledge, and sharing environmental values within families and communities. These strategies enabled the continuation of Alutiiq relationships to land despite sustained colonial coercion.

Methodologically, this article draws on a large body of evidence through archival analysis, ethnographic interpretation, and oral histories to construct a gendered environmental history of the Kodiak Archipelago. Knowledge of the precolonial period derives from archaeological research and secondary historical and anthropological scholarship, both Alutiiq-produced and non-Alutiiq. For the Russian period, the article draws on colonial records alongside secondary historical scholarship, again both Alutiiq-produced and non-Alutiiq. The American period primarily relies on Alutiiq oral traditions and community-produced sources. Alutiiq-produced scholarship, recorded oral traditions, and community-based materials serve as the main interpretive framework to ground the work in Alutiiq ways of knowing.

This article treats Indigenous knowledge as the primary source of authority rather than as supplementary to colonial or academic sources. The research presented here is deeply indebted to the scholarship, oral traditions, and cultural materials produced by Alutiiq scholars and community members.<sup>8</sup> Colonial records and non-Alutiiq secondary scholarship are engaged critically, read for their silences, biases, and imperial assumptions, and interpreted in relation to Alutiiq perspectives. I am a settler-scholar from the Chickasaw homelands in Northern Mississippi, writing this article while living and studying on Narragansett and Wampanoag lands. I am not a part of the Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq community and do not claim to speak for it. My aim is to centre Alutiiq women's voices and experiences, while recognizing that my role as a settler scholar is to foreground Alutiiq histories responsibly rather than speak on others' behalf.

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<sup>8</sup> While I have developed relationships with members of the Kodiak Alutiiq community through my broader research, this article was not produced through a formal collaborative or consultative process with community members. I have therefore relied on publicly available community-produced materials, Alutiiq scholarship, and cultural resources, and recognize that my interpretations are shaped and limited by what community members have chosen to share in those contexts.

## Framework and Methodology

The history of Kodiak Alutiiq women's environmental roles is situated within the broader historiography of gender, colonialism, and the environment, and speaks to scholars working at the intersections of Indigenous environmental history, Indigenous feminist scholarship, and the colonial history of Alaska and the North Pacific. While feminist scholars established the foundation for gender as a category of analysis within environmental history, the field often depends on generalized categories that overlook the diversity and specificity of women's experiences.<sup>9</sup> Ecofeminism proposes a relationship between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, but some approaches risk romanticizing women's relationship with nature.<sup>10</sup> These frameworks can conceal how gender, ecology, and colonial power operate across different historical contexts.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the expansion of scholarship on women and the environment, Indigenous women's histories are still underrepresented. Indigenous women and women of colour are often mentioned briefly and generically, creating an illusion of a singular or collective experience. Expanding environmental histories to include Indigenous women's histories is crucial for creating a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the field. This article contributes to the effort by centring an Alaskan Native community whose gendered environmental relationships and colonial encounters remain understudied in both Indigenous environmental history and Indigenous feminist scholarship. Within Indigenous environmental history, it moves the field beyond its predominant focus on the continental United States to examine how an Alaskan Native community understands and sustains relationships with a subarctic marine environment across centuries of colonial disruption.

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9 For more scholarship on gender and environmental history, see: Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Mary-Ellen Kelm and Lorna R. McLean, eds., *This Elusive Land: Women and the Canadian Environment* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Carolyn Merchant, 'Gender and Environmental History,' *The Journal of American History*, 76, no.4 (Mar. 1990); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980); Glinda R. Riley, *Women and Nature: Saving the Wild West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Nancy C. Unger, 'Women and Gender: Useful Categories of Analysis in Environmental History,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

10 Unger, 'Women and Gender,' 624. For more scholarship on ecofeminism, see: Melissa Leach and Cathy Green, 'Gender and Environmental History: From Representation of Women and Nature to Gender Analysis of Ecology and Politics,' *Environment and History* 3, no. 3 (October 1997): 344; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Indraprastha Press, 1988), 38-55.

11 Unger, 'Women and Gender,' 625.

The article draws on Indigenous feminist scholarship that centres women's relationship to the environment. Binnizá/Zapotec & Maya Ch'orti scholar and scientist Jessica Hernandez draws attention to the "strong relationship Indigenous women have with their environments" and calls for "Indigenous women to be brought to the forefront of environmentalism."<sup>12</sup> Her work positions women as knowledge holders who sustain their people, environment, and communities, offering a useful lens for interpreting the environmental history of Kodiak Alutiiq women.<sup>13</sup>

Other Indigenous feminist scholars further shape this analysis by examining how colonial power reshaped gender systems. Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy demonstrates that settler colonialism depends on the survival of the heteropatriarchy and the subjugation of Indigenous women, particularly because women's reproductive abilities threatened colonial social organization.<sup>14</sup> She shows how Indigenous women have been flattened into stereotypes that situate them as passive or sexualized, erasing their central roles within communities. In response, she argues for centring Indigenous women through oral narratives and cultural practices, stressing that this is essential for "(re)righting, (re)riting, and (re)writing Indigenous epistemologies."<sup>15</sup> Drawing on Seneca feminist scholar Mishuana Goeman, Risling Baldy stresses that "Native women are at the center of how our nations, both tribal and non-tribal, have been imagined," and that engaging Native feminisms as fundamental to both traditional cultures and revitalization efforts that develop a future which looks back on the past.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on centring Indigenous women through oral accounts and cultural practices is vital to this article's approach in sharing the histories of Kodiak Alutiiq women and their environments.

Alutiiq women's relationships to the land cannot be separated from their bodily and lived experiences, part of a continuum which includes their social and cultural contexts. Women's authority over their bodies, their knowledge, and their relationships with the environment are bound together. Similarly, Brianna Theobald argues that reproductive politics cannot be separated from colonial politics when she states, "Indigenous women's reproductive bodies proved symbolically and materially central to colonial objectives."<sup>17</sup> Penobscot lawyer and activist Sherri Mitchell further connects women, land, and colonization by examining how the suppression of women's authority is linked to

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12 Jessica Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science* (North Atlantic Books, 2022), 180.

13 Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves*, 180.

14 Cutcha Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 11-12.

15 Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You*, 12.

16 Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You*, 12.

17 Brianna Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 4.

environmental destruction and patriarchal violence.<sup>18</sup> Mitchell argues that reclaiming women's knowledge and authority is necessary for restoring balanced relationships with the land.<sup>19</sup> Within Indigenous feminist scholarship, this article provides a historical case study that applies and extends these frameworks to demonstrate how gender, subsistence, and reproductive and healing knowledge were central to Alutiiq ecological relationships.

This article also engages Marie-Françoise Guédon's concept of matriculture, which she defines as "that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric."<sup>20</sup> Guédon emphasizes that matriculture refers to a cultural system rooted in women's participation in supporting community life, rather than only in kinship structures or social organization.<sup>21</sup> In the Kodiak context, matriculture offers a structure for analyzing Alutiiq women's subsistence labour, reproductive practices, and environmental value as vital to cultural survivance. In this article, ecofeminism is used to situate matricultural systems into a broader history of colonial domination and environmental destruction, emphasizing the role of gender in forming material and cultural life. The sections that follow exhibit how Kodiak Alutiiq women's subsistence labour, reproductive and healing practices, and cultural responsibilities created a reciprocal relationship with the environment and how these relationships were reshaped during Russian and American colonization.

## **Alutiiq Values**

To ground these theoretical frameworks in the Alutiiq context, it is essential to turn to the cultural values that have guided Alutiiq women's relationships with nature. These values created the framework through which Alutiiq women's subsistence, reproductive, and healing practices gained meaning and authority. The core values of the Kodiak Alutiit are divided into five spheres: the physical, social, cognitive, spiritual, and conscience-ethical spheres. While these values were formally identified and codified collaboratively by Alutiiq elders and educators through the Native Educators of Alutiiq Region (NEAR) in 2002, and later translated into the Alutiiq language and organized by Drabek into a five-spheres values map, the Elders understood them as reflective of longstanding Alutiiq lifeways and traditions.<sup>22</sup>

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18 Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), 121.

19 Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions*, 123.

20 Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 3.

21 Guédon, 'Introduction,' 6.

22 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 119.

Alisha Drabek describes the purposes of the values noting that, “they are intended to inspire healthy living and establish a self-determined, positive image for Alutiiq people, thus promoting a strong sense of identity and greater self-esteem, rooted in spirituality.”<sup>23</sup> The physical sphere, known in Alutiiq as *Nuna*—meaning 'land'— “consists of physical health, material objects, economy, and our relationship to the ecosystem.”<sup>24</sup> For Alutiit, *Nuna* represents “the ecological values that sustain well-being and general physical health for the Kodiak Alutiiq people.”<sup>25</sup> This reciprocal relationship shows that the physical health of the land is inseparable from that of the people.<sup>26</sup> Central concepts within this sphere include:

- Nunapet (Our land) 'Ties to our Homeland'
- Nunapet Carliarluki (Taking care of our land) 'Stewardship of animals, land, sky, and waters'
- Unguwacirpet (Our way of being alive) 'A subsistence lifestyle respectful and sustained by the natural world'<sup>27</sup>

The first concept, *Nunapet*, expresses how Alutiiq identity is rooted in their homeland.<sup>28</sup> The *Nunapet Carliarluki* emphasizes the responsibility to respect and care for the homeland.<sup>29</sup> The *Unguwacirpet* refers to an 'all-encompassing way of life" where daily routine is intertwined with the natural world — “living off the land, as a source for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and fuel, through hunting and gathering practices used to gather and process resources firsthand as passed down through the generations.”<sup>30</sup> Together, these values shaped how Alutiit understood and cared for the land, and how the land, in turn, supported them. In the pre-colonial period, Alutiiq women played a central role in upholding and spreading these values through their daily lives within subsistence, reproduction, healing, and knowledge sharing. These values revealed what women’s environmental authority looked like before colonial disruption began.<sup>31</sup>

Central to understanding women’s authority within this value system is Alutiiq gender ideology, which is organized differently from that which Russian and American colonizers would impose. Alutiiq society is matrilineal, tracing kinship and leadership through the

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23 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 143.

24 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 148.

25 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 148.

26 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 148.

27 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 148.

28 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 148.

29 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 150.

30 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 151.

31 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 148.

maternal line. The position of village headman, or *angayuqaq*, passed from a woman's brother to her son (uncle to nephew) rather than father to son, reflecting how central women's lineages were to political and social life.<sup>32</sup> Women's authority extended beyond the subsistence and domestic realm and into the spiritual and ceremonial realm; they served as shamans, healers, and *kala'alek*, religious leaders who oversaw winter hunting festivals.<sup>33</sup> Alutiiq gender ideology is also not binary; they honour two-spirit individuals known as *arnauciq* and *nukallpia'uciq*. The expressions of both feminine and masculine traits by these individuals were understood as a sign of special spiritual power.<sup>34</sup>

## Pre-Colonial Environmental Foundations

The pre-colonial period examined in the next section refers primarily to the Koniag cultural period (AD 1400 to 1763), the cultural period immediately preceding Russian contact.<sup>35</sup> Most of the practices described here are rooted in a long history spanning over seven and a half millennia, across the Ocean Bay, Kachemak, Koniag, and Alutiiq traditions. Archaeologists divide the precolonial history of Kodiak into three related traditions, each reflecting a distinct way of life, although artifact types, housing styles, and patterns of land indicate continuity between these traditions.<sup>36</sup> This reflects the changes of one cultural group over thousands of years. Archaeologists describe developments during these thousands of years in this way:

Kodiak's hunting, fishing, and gathering societies grew, adopted new technologies, and harvested resources with increasing intensity and efficiency. Ultimately, this process resulted in the development of the late prehistoric Alutiiq culture with its large communities, sophisticated technologies, and complex social, spiritual, and artistic traditions.<sup>37</sup>

The subsistence, reproductive, and healing practices described in this section draw primarily on this late prehistoric and early contact period, while acknowledging that Alutiiq culture was dynamic and adaptive long before the Russians arrived. The sources

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32 Crowell et al., 2001, as cited in Tara Lynn Christiansen-Stiller, *Exploring the Concepts of Rematriation and the Sugpiaq/Alutiiq People's Traditional Values and Ways of Being to Address Historical Trauma*, PhD diss. (University of North Dakota, 2025), 17.

33 Amy F. Steffian and April G. Laktonen Counciller, *Alutiiq Traditions: An Introduction to the Native Culture of the Kodiak Archipelago*, 5th ed. (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2022), 57.

34 Steffian and Laktonen Counciller, *Alutiiq Traditions*: 55.

35 Amy F. Steffian, Marnie A. Leist, Sven D. Haakanson Jr., and Patrick G. Saltonstall, eds., *Kal'unek — From Karluk: Kodiak Alutiiq History and the Archaeology of the Karluk One Village Site* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2015), 40.

36 Steffian et al., *Kal'unek*, 40.

37 Steffian et al., *Kal'unek*, 40.

drawn on here include archaeological research, ethnographic accounts, historical secondary literature, and Alutiiq historical scholarship. This section does not present Alutiiq life as static or timeless, but rather as a community built on values deeply rooted in the relationship between people and the environment.

## THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

### Alutiiq Women and Subsistence Practices

To fully understand how Alutiiq women's environmental roles were challenged by colonialism, it is necessary first to situate these roles within their cultural and ecological contexts. This section demonstrates how Alutiiq women's subsistence labour was an integral part of their reciprocal relationship with the environment. Hunting, fishing, and gathering plants, eggs, and shellfish were vital to Alutiiq culture as they not only provided the necessities of life and brought people together, but also connected people to the land.<sup>38</sup> Subsistence practices cultivated kinship between people and land, and the sharing of these practices between community members ensured this knowledge survived. Alutiiq communities revolved around environmental conditions and seasonal cycles, living in their main villages in winter and at seasonal hunting and fishing camps in summer.<sup>39</sup> Almost every aspect of Alutiiq subsistence culture included women. Women worked as mediators between the environment and the community, using their hands to craft essential products and tools. Women were responsible for making grass baskets, spruce root hats, hunting boat skins, and clothing, especially waterproof gut skin parkas.<sup>40</sup> Women collected plants, including vegetables and berries, for food or medicine.<sup>41</sup> Before winter came, women prepared and stored the mammals and fish that the men had harvested. All winter, Alutiiq villages held hunting festivals to honour the spiritual relationship between animals and humans and to ensure success in future hunting expeditions.<sup>42</sup> Hunting festivals included masked dancers, rituals, feasts, and performances.<sup>43</sup> Women also served

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38 Gwenn A. Miller, *Kodiak Kreol: Communities of Empire in Early Russian America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 8; Aron L. Crowell and April Isiik Laktonen Counciller, 'Sugucihpet,' in *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, ed. Aron L. Crowell and Amy F. Steffian (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2001), 137.

39 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 30-33.

40 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 41.

41 Crowell and Counciller, 'Sugucihpet,' 182.

42 Aron L. Crowell and Jeff Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs: Alutiiq Spiritual Life and Traditions,' in *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, edited by Aron L. Crowell and Amy F. Steffian (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2001), 198-203.

43 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 5-6; Crowell and Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs,' 198-203.

as religious leaders, or *kala'alek*, who oversaw the hunting festivals and led their ceremonies.<sup>44</sup>

Women's roles were closely connected with every stage of subsistence processes. Their roles also expose how important women were to Alutiiq society—for example, hunters believed the hunting hats that women crafted brought them good luck or power in their hunts.<sup>45</sup> When a woman became a mother, she was responsible for teaching her daughters these practices to protect the future of their land and community.<sup>46</sup> It was not only through their subsistence practices that Alutiiq women sustained a balanced relationship with the land; their reproductive and healing practices similarly sustained that relationship.

### Alutiiq Women and Reproductive Practices

Alutiiq women's reproductive and healing practices were a second form of environmental responsibility, one which connected population and resource management, animal relations, and overall ecological health. Nancy Unger notes how some Indigenous communities in harsh environments practiced forms of population self-monitoring, and Indigenous women exercised reproductive control as part of this process.<sup>47</sup> Prolonged breastfeeding, for example, was one of the most significant methods. For many Indigenous communities, breastfeeding is a traditional practice that promotes mother-child bonding and keeps an infant healthy.<sup>48</sup> These are some of the reasons women would breastfeed for two to five years, and prolonged breastfeeding suppressed ovulation, bringing decreased fertility.<sup>49</sup>

In 1829, Russian Alaskan governor Ferdinand von Wrangell observed that Alutiiq women breastfed their children for as long as they could or until they were three years old; Russian naval officer G.I. Davydov similarly noted that women nursed their children up to three years “and sometimes even longer, if a new pregnancy has not intervened.”<sup>50</sup>

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44 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 5-6; Crowell and Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs,' 208-211.

45 Crowell and Counciller, 'Sugucihpet,' 157.

46 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 45.

47 Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*, 19.

48 Best Start Resource Centre. *Breastfeeding for the Health and Future of Our Nation: A Booklet for Indigenous Families*. (Toronto, Ontario, 2017); 'Indigenous Breastfeeding,' FACE Resources, last accessed 12 December 2024, <https://www.faceresources.org/indigenous-breastfeeding/>; Erika Finestone and Cynthia Stirbys, 'Indigenous Birth in Canada: Reconciliation and Reproductive Justice in the Settler State,' in *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth*, ed. Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2017).

49 Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*, 19.

50 Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangell and Richard A. Pierce, *Russian America: Statistical and Ethnographic Information*, (Kingston, Ont: Limestone Press, 1980), 53; Gavriil Ivanovich Davydov, *Dvukratnoe*

Further, the importance of breastfeeding in Alutiiq society is reflected in Alutiiq tattoo practices. Alutiit used piercings and tattoos to signify age, gender, family, home village, achievements, and social standing.<sup>51</sup> Most importantly, tattoos held spiritual significance, and new mothers wore tattoos on their breasts in the hope that they would bring milk.<sup>52</sup> This tradition underlines the value Alutiiq mothers placed on breastfeeding.

Through breastfeeding, women exercised control over their reproductive bodies. Whether these decisions were made with individual or community needs in mind, they contributed to the population management by Alutiit on the island.<sup>53</sup> Because the amount of resources available at a given time determined survival, spacing out births enhanced the well-being and sustainability of Alutiiq communities on Kodiak. Through breastfeeding, Alutiiq women taught their children care, responsibility, and reciprocity. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson discusses breastfeeding as an act of resistance against colonization, as a method of passing down community values.<sup>54</sup> For Alutiiq women, this included passing down the understanding that the land and its resources were not separate from the people who depended on them. The relationship between community and environment was one of reciprocal responsibility, which began at birth.

Midwives were also an integral part of Alutiiq culture. Midwives were everyday healers in their community who, according to anthropologist Joanne B. Mulcahy, “had extensive knowledge of plants, midwifery, and a bloodletting technique called lancing, and other forms of surgery.”<sup>55</sup> Midwives were involved in the birthing process from the prenatal period to postnatal care. They often spent time in the steam bath with their patients, massaging and healing them. This healing knowledge extended to plant medicine. Yarrow, for example, was prepared by picking the leaves, soaking them in hot water, and applying them directly to ease menstrual cramps.<sup>56</sup> This practice illustrates how intimately Alutiiq women’s environmental knowledge and bodily care were entangled.

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*puteshestvie v Ameriku morskikh ofitserov Khvostova i Davydova, pisannoe sim poslednim*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Morskaia tipografiia, 1810), trans. Colin Bearne, ed. Richard A. Pierce as *Two Voyages to Russian America, 1802–1807* (Kingston, ON: Limestone Press, 1977), 44–45.

51 Steffian and Laktonen Counciller, *Alutiiq Traditions*: 55.

52 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 49.

53 Breastfeeding and extended lactation appear to have been the primary means of birth spacing among Kodiak Alutiiq women. Drawing on earlier ethnographic accounts of Kodiak, anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička notes that there is “nothing definite on the subject of infanticide.” This suggests infanticide was not a documented practice in the Kodiak Alutiiq context. Aleš Hrdlička, *The Anthropology of Kodiak Island* (Philadelphia: Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, 1944), 80.

54 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 148-152.

55 Joanne B. Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island: The Life of an Alutiiq Healer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 45.

56 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 57.

Alutiiq communities also had protocols for childbirth itself. Russian observer Urey Lisianski recorded that childbirth took place in a separate hut, and mother as well as child are obliged to stay there for twenty days, after which the mother washed herself and the child and took a sweat bath.<sup>57</sup> Read through a European lens, this appeared as quarantine; however, the isolation is meant to mark a monumental change in a woman's life and give the child and mother time together before returning to community life. The role of the midwife was essential to a village; she was a healer who was a liaison "between nature and culture, or between the world of the living and ancestral spirits."<sup>58</sup> Midwives maintained a 'circle of reciprocity' with the natural world by bringing new life into the village and guiding women through childbirth; they "created the community anew."<sup>59</sup> Postmenopausal women gained freedoms denied to younger, fertile women, and midwives in particular accumulated spiritual and healing authority as they aged.<sup>60</sup> Their position in the community was shaped by their lifetime of care and practice. Alutiiq midwives reveal how closely environmental knowledge and community continuity were intertwined. Through an ecofeminist lens, this type of midwifery illustrates how the health of women's bodies and the health of the community were understood as inseparable, making a midwife both a healer of the community and a keeper of Alutiiq futurity.

Menstruation protocols also exhibit how closely Alutiiq women's reproductive lives were tied to the environment. A young Alutiiq woman's first menstrual cycle marked a significant coming-of-age moment. During her first cycle, she would traditionally spend up to six months in a designated room or dwelling, and her reemergence into the community symbolized her journey into womanhood.<sup>61</sup> To commemorate this transition, young women received two vertical tattooed lines on their chin, visually marking their new status.<sup>62</sup>

Menstruation itself was surrounded by protocols that reflected an understanding of women's reproductive power and its relationship to the environment. As Alisha Drabek explains, Alutiiq traditions emphasize avoiding contamination of the environment and connect women's reproductive power directly to environmental health. Drabek writes that "Alutiiq traditions of right behavior... also extend to the power of women," particularly during menstruation.<sup>63</sup> These protocols might appear as restrictions imposed on women from an outside perspective, but Mulcahy cautions against this reading, noting

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57 Urey Lisianski, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806* (London: John Booth, 1814), II, 80.

58 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 71.

59 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 50.

60 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 71.

61 Crowell and Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs,' 206.

62 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 49.

63 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 151.

that in a symbolic system, an element may be “regarded as powerful without being negative.”<sup>64</sup> She asks whether seclusion limited women’s power or was it instead “a source of strength for women, a time when important roles were learned, and ritual knowledge passed on.”<sup>65</sup> This was a question that elder women answered, describing these traditions as keeping life orderly, and young women listened. As Clyda Christensen of Larsen Bay recalled, “We listened! That was the midwives and older people teaching us.”<sup>66</sup> This suggests that menstrual protocols were not experienced as punishment but as instruction, and were part of the intergenerational passing down of knowledge that connected women to one another and to the land. Though recorded in the twentieth century, these practices reflect knowledge disseminated across generations and are ingrained in precolonial Alutiiq relationships with the environment. Elder Lucille Antowak Davis recalled being told by her father that once she began menstruating, she could no longer accompany him on fox hunts because she would “dirty the ground where I trap.”<sup>67</sup> Menstruating women were also prohibited from crossing rivers “for fear that the Salmon would stop swimming upstream.”<sup>68</sup> These practices are clear examples of matriculture; women’s reproductive lives were an intricate part of the community and ecological life, contributing to sustaining and regulating life.

Rather than signifying a lack of environmental stewardship or agency, these practices reflect an Alutiiq worldview in which women’s menstruation was understood as significant and consequential. The restrictions surrounding menstruation were a form of environmental regulation that viewed women’s bodies as powerful and needing protocol to maintain ecological balance. As Drabek notes, these protocols also signify the belief that animals are “highly sensitive to humans... and to give themselves up in a hunt they expect to be respected.”<sup>69</sup> By observing these regulations during menstruation, Alutiiq women upheld environmental balance and reinforced reciprocal relationships with the land. Together, subsistence labour and reproductive and healing practices positioned women as active agents in maintaining environmental balance, a balance that colonial powers sought to dismantle.

## RUSSIAN COLONIZATION

Russian colonization of the Kodiak Archipelago began in the mid-eighteenth century and fundamentally reshaped Alutiiq life. Following Vitus Bering’s expeditions in the 1740s,

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64 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 38.

65 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 38.

66 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 38.

67 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 151.

68 Crowell and Counciller, ‘Sugucihpet’ 142.

69 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 151.

competing fur trading companies moved into the region in pursuit of sea otter pelts, eventually leading to the consolidation of the fur trade into the royally chartered Russian-American Company (RAC) in 1799. The RAC governed the colony and regulated the fur trade in Alaska until the colony was sold to the United States in 1867.

From the onset, Russian colonization was violent and extractive. The Awa'uq Massacre of 1784, in which Russian forces violently subdued Alutiit at Refuge Rock, marked a turning point in Alutiiq history. The following decades brought hostage-taking, epidemic disease, control over food supplies, labour extraction, and significant population decline.<sup>70</sup> Prior to and in the early decades of Russian presence, Alutiiq communities continued to be spread across dozens of villages throughout the archipelago and had little interference in village social life from Russians. This changed dramatically after the 1837 smallpox epidemic, when the RAC consolidated survivors from around sixty-five villages into seven larger settlements near Russian posts.<sup>71</sup>

This reorganization of Alutiiq settlement patterns brought more of the population under direct colonial surveillance for the first time. The experiences described in this section shifted significantly across the Russian period, meaning Alutiiq village life in 1790 looked quite different in the 1850s. Alutiiq women's bodies, labour, and reproductive knowledge became particular targets of colonial control. The subsections that follow examine how Russian colonialism challenged Alutiiq women's authority over marriage and kinship, subsistence labour, healing and cultural knowledge, and their own bodily lives, while also showing how women adapted and resisted within these constraints.

## Marriage And Kinship

As Russian colonization began in the mid-eighteenth century, the relationship between Alutiiq women and the environment began to shift. Violence, starvation, and epidemics tore through communities, with Alutiiq women especially vulnerable.<sup>72</sup> The 1837 smallpox epidemic alone killed approximately thirty percent of the Kodiak Island population, dramatically diminishing the Alutiiq labour force the RAC depended on.<sup>73</sup>

The dynamics described in this section operated differently depending on where Alutiiq women lived and when. Before the 1837 epidemic, most of Alutiit lived in villages at some

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70 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 75; Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732–1867* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 39–58, 101–120; Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 18–36, 71–95, 96–121.

71 Sonja Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2008), 39.

72 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 75; Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 39–58, 101–120; Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 18–36, 71–95, 96–121.

73 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 85.

distance from Russian posts, and the RAC's ability to reshape domestic and social life was constrained. After consolidation, proximity to Russian posts and *kreol* settlements intensified colonial pressures on family structure, labour, and women's reproductive lives.<sup>74</sup>

Unions between Russian men and Alutiiq women, which began in the eighteenth century, continued throughout the Russian period, and were described as being relationships of "amity and enmity."<sup>75</sup> Since very few Russian women came to Alaska, many Russian hunters married or cohabited with Alutiiq women.<sup>76</sup> While some relationships were coerced, others were negotiated or consensual, and some Alutiiq women likely made strategic choices to form a union in order to secure survival, resources, or protection within increasingly harsh colonial conditions.<sup>77</sup> Marriage could function as a plan for survival rather than an imposed condition. These were active decisions within and against colonial structures that sought to eliminate these women's agency. As Risling Baldy demonstrates, settler colonialism depends on the subjugation of Indigenous women precisely because their reproductive authority threatens colonial social organization, which is why pressure was placed on Alutiiq women to adopt Western domesticity.

As *kreol* communities grew, the RAC's need to classify them grew. Under the second charter of the RAC in 1821, *kreols* became a recognized social estate within the Russian Empire and were given special privileges giving members of the *kreol* social estate easy access to employment with the RAC.<sup>78</sup> The RAC encouraged the growth of the *kreol* social estate, believing that *kreols* were "a bridge between people and savages."<sup>79</sup> Within this system, Alutiiq mothers were expected to raise their sons as future RAC hunters, officers, and clerks, and to raise their daughters to be suitable wives for company employees. These expectations increasingly pressured Alutiiq women to adopt Western notions of motherhood, domesticity, and marital duties. For example, some Alutiiq women were baptized into Orthodox Christianity before marrying their Russian husbands in an Orthodox Church. Where Alutiiq menstrual protocols had positioned women as active participants in maintaining environmental and community well-being, Orthodox

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74 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 46. *Kreol* (plural: *kreoly*) was in common use in the colony from the early nineteenth century and formally codified as an official legal designation under the RAC's 1821 charter, which recognized *kreols* as a distinct social estate within the Russian Empire. The term referred to the mixed-heritage offspring of Russian men and Alaska Native women. The Alutiiq word for *kreol* is *kasaakaruaq*, Roxanne Easley, 'Creole Policy and Practice in Russian America: Iakov Egorovich Netsvetov,' *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 108, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2017): 63–64.

75 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 114.

76 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 42.

77 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 85-96; Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 54-59.

78 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 40.

79 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 96.

Christianity introduced a markedly different framework. Rooted in Levitical notions of ritual impurity and officialized in Canon 2 of Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century, Orthodox canon law held that menstruating women were ritually unclean and barred them from entering the church or receiving communion during their period.<sup>80</sup> This was not a recognition of women's power, but a restriction on their participation in religious life.<sup>81</sup> Because Russian employees on the frontier were prone to drinking and gambling, the RAC promoted ideals of domesticity that positioned Alutiiq women as good housewives who could soften and improve their husbands' habits and thereby create more diligent workers. Ultimately, the welfare and prosperity of the RAC depended on the cultivation of colonial family life and domestic order.<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, Alutiiq and *kreol* women in *kreol* settlements and Russian posts brought Alutiiq material and immaterial culture with them, maintaining alliances and trade connections to their Alutiiq relatives and villages of origin.<sup>83</sup> The RAC's own policy kept Alutiits and *kreols* administratively separate, but women moved across boundaries and between both worlds.<sup>84</sup> Women moved among villages and colonial settlements, and this is largely invisible in the historical record. Russian administrators recorded the population of a village based on the ethnicity of the male heads of each household, making the presence of Alutiiq women or *kreol* women at a *kreol* settlement or Russian post undocumented.<sup>85</sup> This movement was a form of intercultural, economic, and kinship negotiation: by maintaining trade connections and alliances with their villages of origin, women circulated Alutiiq goods, food knowledge, and subsistence practices in colonial settlements, and by sustaining kinship ties across the administrative boundary between Alutiiq and *kreol* categories, they ensured that cultural knowledge was not contained within colonial classifications but continued to flow between communities. Alutiiq women used the spaces between colonial categories to maintain the networks that colonial administrations sought to sever.

### **Labour And Yasak**

Beyond the domestic sphere, Alutiiq women were also compelled to perform labour for the RAC under coercive colonial conditions. The RAC organized large sea otter hunting parties with Alutiiq men from across the entire archipelago that would travel as far as

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80 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 40.

81 Teva Regule, *Women and the Canons of the Church: A Difficult Relationship*, paper presented at the Volos Academy Canon Law Conference, May 2014, 2–3.

82 Wrangell, *Russian America*, 16 .

83 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 46.

84 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 91.

85 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 46.

Sitka and the Kenai peninsula for months at a time.<sup>86</sup> Many men never returned, killed by storms and drownings.<sup>87</sup> This left many villages across the archipelago composed solely of women, children, and elders, and left them wholly responsible for managing subsistence practices. After the 1837 epidemic, the RAC responded to the diminished workforce and directed that “women and children were to be employed to enable men to go hunting.”<sup>88</sup> Women’s labour became essential to the survival of the colonial economy.

The RAC extracted food and goods from Alutiiq women, requiring them to supply these products for the company stores with little or no compensation for this labour. The company stores sold back the supplies to the Alutiiq communities which had produced them.<sup>89</sup> In many cases, this labour was performed at the expense of the women’s ability to prepare sufficient supplies for their own families, as their labour and resources were diverted to the company.<sup>90</sup> Through the extraction of women’s labour and the restructuring of domestic responsibilities, the RAC significantly constrained women’s autonomy over their relationships with the environment.

Women’s labour was further affected by the RAC through the introduction of *yasak*, a tribute system which required Indigenous communities to supply the Russians with furs to demonstrate their loyalty.<sup>91</sup> Although this system was officially abolished in 1794, Alutiiq hunters continued to be pressured to sell the majority of their furs to the RAC for little compensation, a policy which the Russians enforced with violence.<sup>92</sup> Within this context, women’s labour was redirected away from subsistence practices towards the colonial economy.

One example of this change was Alutiiq women stitching bird skins into parkas that served as payment for Alutiiq labour.<sup>93</sup> Before the Russian period, bird skin parkas were not commonly worn among the Alutiiq, but because all fur materials were reserved for company use, bird skins became the only option for making parkas. A Russian Orthodox missionary Hieromonk Gedeon records, after Alutiiq men gathered the bird skins, “the men’s wives, mothers, or sisters processed the skins and finished the parkas, the later are issued to their men— and to the others— against the sea otters they take.”<sup>94</sup> This process

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86 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 66-67.

87 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 66-67.

88 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 84-85.

89 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 70-71.

90 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 70-71.

91 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 85.

92 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 90.

93 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 86.

94 Hieromonk Gideon, *The Round the World Voyage of Hieromonk Gideon, 1803–1809*, trans. Lydia T. Black, ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, ON: Limestone Press, 1989), quoted in Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 69.

drew directly on women's traditional ecological knowledge, including their understanding of which bird species produced suitable skins, how to harvest and process them seasonally, and the technical expertise required to prepare and stitch them, which had been developed and passed down across generations as part of Alutiiq relationships with the environment. The RAC extracted this knowledge alongside women's physical labour, redirecting it from community sustenance toward colonial production. Time spent performing labour for the colonial economy replaced other forms of subsistence labour and often left little food or material to bring home.<sup>95</sup> The colonial economy extracted Alutiiq women's labour and environmental knowledge, while denying its economic significance. This would continue into the American period.

Through the tribute system and forced exchange system, women's labour became a part of colonial extraction rather than community survival. At the same time, the incorporation of Alutiiq women's labour into the colonial economy did not strip it of all meaning. Traditional subsistence practices continued under colonial restraint. This is seen in archaeological evidence from village sites where Alutiiq material culture was found alongside imported European goods.<sup>96</sup> Women continued to rely on their skills to sustain their communities and preserve environmental knowledge, even as these skills were used by colonial forces. Women's labour for the Russian colonizers, then, was an intersection of coercion and choice. Alutiiq women did not simply submit to colonial labour demands; they worked within them and sustained their skills and knowledge which that colonial extraction system depended on but could not control. The RAC could not fully extinguish the matricultural system of women's participation in social, spiritual, and ecological life.

### **Children, Schooling, And Reproductive Authority**

For *kreol* children living near Russian posts, colonialism further disrupted their connection with their Alutiiq culture and heritage. Many children were sent to day schools or boarding schools away from their villages, where — according to Russian naval officer and imperial administrator Pavel Golovin — they were taught Russian, God's commandments, and basic arithmetic.<sup>97</sup> Beyond early lessons, the curriculum became strongly gendered: boys were trained to become bookkeepers, warehouse overseers, captain's assistants, captains, and church officials, while girls were taught domestic labour so they could become servants or wives of RAC employees.<sup>98</sup> This was not the experience of many Alutiiq children who lived in villages that were not under the direct control of Russians, a

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95 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 92.

96 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 67-68.

97 Pavel Nikolaevich Golovin, *Civil and Savage Encounters: The Worldly Travel Letters of an Imperial Russian Navy Officer, 1860-1861* (Portland: Western Imprints, Oregon Historical Society, 1983), 100-105.

98 Golovin, *Civil and Savage Encounters*, 101.

consequence of the RAC policy of keeping Alutiiq and *kreol* populations separate because these groups served the company differently.

For many families, the schooling system undermined Alutiiq women's autonomy and familial lives. They lost authority over deciding when to have children, how to raise them, and how to pass on traditional knowledge. Children were not guaranteed to inherit the reciprocal relationship with the land and its seasonal resources that their ancestors had sustained across generations. Their sons, raised within RAC systems, were not promised the same relationship with hunting, based on stewardship rather than extraction.

Daughters' menstruation, traditionally understood within Alutiiq culture as an expression of women's spiritual power and their responsibility toward the environment, a recognition of the strength women carried rather than a mark of impurity, was reframed under Orthodox influence as pollution and spiritual uncleanness.<sup>99</sup> This was a fundamental disruption of how Alutiiq women understood their bodies in relation to the land. Even under these pressures, Alutiiq women found ways to maintain their authority, passing their healing and environmental knowledge through breastfeeding, midwifery, and informal transmission, practices colonial institutions could surveil but not control.

### **Environmental Damage From The Fur Trade**

Russian colonialism disrupted not only Alutiiq social and economic life but also transformed the marine environment, the foundation of Alutiiq women's subsistence labour and their communities' survival. The fur trade's primary target, the sea otter, was a keystone species whose removal had severe consequences for the surrounding environment.<sup>100</sup> After fur trader Grigori Shelikhov's arrival on Kodiak in 1785, sea otter hunting on the island enormously escalated, and within a decade, the surrounding waters were nearly exhausted. Without sea otters to control the sea urchin populations, urchins multiply and deplete the kelp forests that shelter fish, mussels, and other invertebrates that Alutiiq communities depended on.<sup>101</sup> For Alutiiq women, this was catastrophic, as the nearshore environment provided a large share of their food resources. With men being conscripted into sea otter and fur seal hunting parties, women were the only ones responsible for gathering food for the family.<sup>102</sup> The resulting decline in nutrition made Alutiiq communities more vulnerable to the epidemic diseases introduced with Russian contact, connecting environmental collapse directly to population decline that further

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99 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 151; Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 38.

100 Ryan Tucker Jones, *Empire of Extinction: Russians and the North Pacific's Strange Beasts of the Sea, 1741–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 92, 94.

101 Jones, *Empire of Extinction*, 97.

102 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 84-85.

destabilized Alutiiq life.<sup>103</sup> Read through an ecofeminist lens, the destruction of the sea otter is inseparable from the assault on Alutiiq women's bodies and labour. Environmental degradation and the subjugation of women were part of a single colonial project.

Russian colonizers sought to remake the Alutiiq women of Kodiak and the land itself, and some impacts of colonization were irreversible, although a permanently severed relationship between Alutiiq women and their environment was not among them. After Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867, colonialism was not dismantled but only replaced under a new structure, and Alutiiq women faced similar challenges from another colonizing power. No significant changes occurred overnight, aside from slightly more freedom and opportunities to return to certain Alutiiq practices. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that American capitalism and Christian missionaries began to encroach on Kodiak Island.

## AMERICAN COLONIZATION

The sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 did not end the colonial disruption of Alutiiq life but merely replaced one colonial structure with another. In the early decades of the American period, the federal government had little direct presence on Kodiak, and Alutiiq communities retained some continuity with practices that persisted during the Russian period.<sup>104</sup> This changed towards the end of the nineteenth century and accelerated in the twentieth century. Commercial fishing, Protestant missionary activity, and federal boarding school policies changed the economic, social, and spiritual frameworks of the archipelago.<sup>105</sup> While the Russian colonial period focused on the extraction of marine mammals and the labour of Alutiiq hunters, American colonialism focused on wage labour and the suppression of Alutiiq culture and language.<sup>106</sup> For Alutiiq women, this meant new challenges to their relationship with the environment; just as during the Russian period, they adapted, resisted, and maintained their authority.

### Experiences with the Canning Industry

American colonial governance restructured, rather than dismantled, the systems that were already constraining Alutiiq women's environmental and reproductive roles. This section examines how industrial fishing, wage labour, and schooling further challenged these roles. Commercial fishing rapidly overtook Kodiak's economy after the first cannery

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103 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 84-85.

104 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 107.

105 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 111-113, 123-127.

106 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 111-113, 123-127.

opened on the island in 1881.<sup>107</sup> Subsistence practices shifted from being disrupted by Russian entrepreneurship to being forced to participate in an American cash economy. Alutiiq women who were members of the Orthodox Church or married to RAC employees no longer had special status or extra resources to protect themselves in this new society. As the canning industry expanded on Kodiak, it replaced many of the families' subsistence practices as men worked on dories and fishing boats for private companies while women worked in canneries, cleaning and packing fish. This labour drew on Alutiiq women's existing knowledge of fish species, season patterns, and preparation and preservation methods developed across generations of subsistence practice.<sup>108</sup> The cannery industry did not need to build this knowledge because it positioned itself to exploit it. They benefited from women's familiarity with the resource and the work, while framing that familiarity as an inherent capacity rather than the aggregated environmental knowledge it was. Scholar Juliana Hu Pegues emphasizes that Native Alaskan women's labour in canneries was framed as a natural extension of their traditional roles rather than as legitimate industrial labour in a capitalist economy, a characterization that racialized their labour. This framing erases Native women's labour from histories of commercial fishing in Alaska.<sup>109</sup> This fits into how Risling Baldy describes how settler colonialism strives to flatten Indigenous women into functional categories that serve colonial economies. For Alutiiq women, this represented yet another colonial reframing of their work within a system in which they were not in control.

As the canning industry grew on Kodiak, cannery work became a defining feature of Alutiiq women's and girls' lives. *Illuani* — meaning 'to be inside the story' in the Alutiiq language, from the root *iluo* meaning 'in it or inside it' — oral history accounts provide evidence of how Alutiiq women and girls experienced this shift, showing how the canning industry reshaped mobility, childhood, and seasonal routines.<sup>110</sup> In 1976, teacher Dave Kubiak and his high school students on Kodiak founded an oral history magazine entitled *Illuani*. The students interviewed older community members to record their experiences and memories to share with the greater Kodiak community. These magazines are a valuable source of information for understanding what everyday life was like on Kodiak during the twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> As mentioned in the accounts of many older Alutiiq women, the cannery industry provided their first wage job as girls.

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107 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 105.

108 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 111-13.

109 Juliana Hu Pegues, 'Unbecoming Workers: Asian Men and Native Women in Alaska's Cannery Labor Regime,' in *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 109-145.

110 Dave Kubiak, Ed Opheim Sr., Florence Pestrikoff, Iver Matutill, and Susan Malalill, *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 1 (May 2001).

111 Dave Kubiak, Ed Opheim Sr., Florence Pestrikoff, Iver Matutill, and Susan Malalill, *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 1 (May 2001): 1–10.

These accounts show both constraint and agency. They show the downsides of working in a cannery while also showing the opportunities that women navigated within colonial labour systems. In 1924, Natalie Simeonoff, who grew up on Kodiak's Woody Island, recalls beginning work in a cannery at age twelve. She remembers that cannery work required mobility, as families moved between locations depending on seasonal labour demands and job availability.<sup>112</sup> Alma Soderberg's experiences of working in canneries follow a similar pattern. She began working in a cannery in Ouzinkie in 1957 at the age of seventeen and throughout her life, she moved around depending on where work was available. Together, these accounts illustrate how Alutiiq girlhood became reorganized around industrial labour rather than subsistence practices at an early age. Alma also emphasizes the physical difficulty of the work, including early mornings, long hours, repetitive labour, and cold conditions. At the same time, Alma explains how she liked the opportunity to earn money and work alongside others. Many Alutiiq women remember working in canneries with nostalgia, as canneries became important sites of community.<sup>113</sup>

Alma also noted that cannery labour offered opportunities to learn about the world beyond Kodiak and to travel to other parts of the island.<sup>114</sup> Her reflections on the difficulties and the benefits of working in a cannery expose the complexities of Alutiiq women's experiences in the cannery industry. These accounts resist a singular narrative of victimhood or triumph; they reveal women navigating real constraints while seeking meaning within them. Reflecting on how many Alutiiq women found community in canneries highlights the perseverance of Alutiiq women in enduring life under colonial regimes and in finding mutual support.

The commercial fishing industry also attracted many immigrants to Kodiak, particularly from Scandinavian countries. As a result, Kodiak became a place where many cultures converged. The mixing of these cultures and the introduction of new social and economic structures made it increasingly difficult to maintain strong ties to Alutiiq culture. Julia Naughton from Afognak recalls that during the summers in her childhood, she and her brother would play cannery, building a pretend cannery on the edge of the lake and using a boat to catch fish.<sup>115</sup> This memory shows how, even as families continued to pass down subsistence practices, children were also absorbing a new worldview shaped by industrial labour and capitalist production.

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112 Natalie Simeonoff, 'Growing Up on Woody Island,' *Illuani: Inside, the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 7 (1976): 85–89.

113 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 113.

114 Alma Soderberg, 'That's the Toughest Job I Ever Had,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no.4 (2004): 32–33.

115 Julia Naughton, 'Afognak Was a Nice Place to Be Born and Raised...', *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 8 (1979): 17-21.

## Mission and Boarding Schools

Cannery labour was not the only transformation Alutiiq women experienced during the twentieth century. Mission and boarding schools intensified these disruptions by targeting language, kinship, and intergenerational knowledge sharing. Russian Orthodox education had allowed Alutiiq students to speak multiple languages and did not seek to sever their ties to their culture and environment fully. In contrast, the Baptist mission schools, which opened in the late nineteenth century, forbade students from speaking any language other than English and relied on shame and punishment to discipline Alutiiq children. During this same period, boarding schools became increasingly common. From Kodiak, children were sent to boarding schools in Alaska and as far away as Carlisle, Pennsylvania. These institutions were designed to remove Indigenous children from their communities, preventing Elders from passing down knowledge intended to ensure community continuity. Children in boarding schools were often required to perform manual labour and learn a service trade. At Carlisle, children faced hunger, punishment, isolation, disease, and harsh labour. Two Alutiiq girls, Anastasia Ashouwak and Pariscova Friendoff, passed away at Carlisle from tuberculosis.<sup>116</sup>

On Kodiak, the Baptist Mission opened an orphanage on Woody Island in 1893. Children from across Kodiak were brought to the orphanage — sometimes orphaned, sometimes taken from families — and grew up on Woody Island. Girls were expected to complete household labour alongside schooling; upon turning eighteen, they were encouraged to marry. Although the orphanage closed in 1938, other schools remained open and continued to operate under similar principles. Together, these mission and boarding schools functioned as tools of Americanization, an attempt at disrupting Alutiiq relationships to land and community and assimilating the people into a capitalist economy.<sup>117</sup> These institutions targeted the matricultural system, which sustained Alutiiq life and allowed for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge between women.

Despite the disruptions introduced by canneries and mission schools to Alutiiq society, Alutiiq women maintained subsistence labour as a thriving practice within their own terms. These practices did not disappear under colonial pressure but were sustained within Alutiiq families. For example, Maryrose Castillo from Old Harbor recounts that her mother taught her to sew skins and weave baskets, often alongside friends who gathered to work together. She also remembers hunting for foxes, rabbits, minks, and seals with her father and grandfather and being raised on Native foods, such as clams, salmon, seal meat, berries, and wild greens.<sup>118</sup> Maryrose's memories demonstrate how subsistence

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116 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 123-127.

117 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 123-127.

118 Maryrose Castillo, 'You Could Go Out Hunting,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 2, no. 3 (1984): 46-48.

knowledge was not abandoned in the past, but remained part of everyday life, even as it was challenged. These simple acts of cultural preservation are also part of how everyday actions are acts of resurgence or resistance.<sup>119</sup>

Food preparation became another site where Alutiiq women maintained authority over their lives, adapting to the Russian and American ingredients introduced while continuing to use Alutiiq systems of nutrition. Along with traditional food systems, women prepared Russian dishes or incorporated American products into their cooking. In many cases, these foods were indigenized—for example, using salmon to make Russian *perok* or preparing Salmonberry jam for blini.<sup>120</sup> Jenny Zeedar recalls how her mother used bear oil as Crisco, mixing modern cooking with Alutiiq food knowledge.<sup>121</sup> These examples reveal how Alutiiq women asserted agency over food systems, blending new food methods with their own and maintaining control over their resources. Indigenizing food practices is a form of matriculture because women are sustaining communal life through everyday acts of adaptation.

### Reproductive and Healing Practices

Women's healing and reproductive knowledge remained rooted in women's environmental systems, illustrating continuity in plant knowledge, midwifery practices, and women's responsibility for community wellbeing. Jenny Zeedar reflects that "they never used to have doctors" and that "our mothers took care of us themselves," highlighting her mother's knowledge of plants and their healing properties. Her mother boiled wild roses for tea and used different bushes called *wenicks* for skincare in the steam bath.<sup>122</sup> Alutiiq midwives continued to play a central role in community health. An *Illuani* magazine article on Alutiiq midwifery notes that midwives remained essential in villages around Kodiak, particularly because there was no doctor in Kodiak until 1938.<sup>123</sup> The steam bath functioned as a healing space and as a community gathering place for midwives and women. Even after the Community Health Aide Program was established in 1968, these roles did not disappear, but they were reconceptualized. Community Health Aids served as liaisons between villages and Western medicine. This work was rooted in the positions and tradition of the village midwife.<sup>124</sup>

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119 Gina Starblanket, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, 3rd ed. (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2020), 8-9.

120 Peter Olsen and Nina Olsen, 'Recipe for Pirok,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 1 (1976): 95–97.

121 Jenny Zeedar, 'My Mom Used Bear Oil,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 2, no. 2 (1983): 48-50.

122 Zeedar, 'My Mom Used Bear Oil,' 49.

123 Dr. Bob Johnson, Annie Boskofsky, Kaba Chichenoff, and Christine Lukin, 'The Midwives Were Wonderful People,' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 9 (1980): 82–85.

124 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 62.

The decline of breastfeeding in the twentieth century due to the rise of infant formula represents a rupture in practices historically rooted in women's bodies, nourishment, and reciprocal care. As Jenece Mordt argues, religious ideology, industrial ambition, and flawed science contributed to a cultural shift, "one where natural, ancestral practices were increasingly replaced by processed alternatives."<sup>125</sup> Mothers were encouraged to use formula because breastfeeding was framed as inconvenient and incompatible with working in the modern world. Mordt further notes that Indigenous mothers faced additional barriers, including the lack of paid maternity leave, inadequate access to lactation support, and cultural stigma around breastfeeding, often rooted in historical trauma.<sup>126</sup> The decline in breastfeeding ruptured Alutiiq reproductive practices. Yet Alutiiq women found ways to maintain reproductive knowledge within and against these pressures; midwifery persists, plant knowledge has been passed down, and the steam bath remains a site of community for women.

### Ecological and Political Crises

A series of ecological and political crises, including militarization, natural disasters, and oil contamination, further reshaped Alutiiq women's ability to sustain their relationships with the environment. The first was the militarization of Kodiak during World War II. Amid growing anxiety about Japanese expansion in Asia in the 1930s, the United States began to increase its military presence in Alaska. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the bombings of the Aleutian Islands, construction on Kodiak intensified exponentially. Naval bases, forts, and roads were built, and soldiers, officers, and contractors arrived in large numbers.<sup>127</sup> Everyday life was reorganized around the possibility of an attack. Alutiiq families dug trenches in their backyards, participated in air-raid drills, and learned to use gas masks. Vivian Beukers, who was ten during the war, remembers bringing the gas masks to school and practising air-raid drills. She also recalls how everything was rationed, from nylon stockings to vegetables and butter.<sup>128</sup> As many Alutiiq men served in the war, women were left to manage households, care for children, and maintain subsistence practices under harsh conditions. Frieda Reft, a Karluk elder, recalls how her husband...

...was a good skipper... so he had to go out to the Aleutians to run a tugboat that used to haul bombs. He was gone for fourteen months. During the war, we had to keep our windows so there would be no lights showing.<sup>129</sup>

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125 Jenece Mordt, *The Formula Empire: The Hidden History of How Formula Replaced Breastmilk* (n.p., 2025), 10.

126 Mordt, *The Formula Empire*, 108.

127 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 134-137.

128 Vivian Beukers, 'If You Want to Shoot Me, You're Welcome to It!' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 2, no. 4 (1985): 40-49.

129 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 135.

The war added new restrictions and anxieties to women's environmental labour. Women, already responsible for feeding families and maintaining community well-being, now had to navigate all of their under conditions of military occupation, rationing, and the constant threat of danger.

The second significant rupture was the Great Alaska Earthquake of March 27, 1964. Measuring 9.2 in magnitude, the earthquake lasted for more than four minutes and triggered a tsunami that destroyed much of downtown Kodiak and its harbour. Vivian Beukers recalls fleeing to higher ground with her children, while her husband stayed in town (where martial law had been declared) to help in the aftermath. When she returned the next day to retrieve supplies, she encountered a man with a gun in her yard who warned her, "If you take another step, I'm going to shoot you." She remembers, "I was so tired. I was cold, I was hungry... I said, 'I've had enough for one night. If you want to shoot me, and take care of those kids, you're welcome to it,' and I kept walking."<sup>130</sup> Her account reveals that twenty-seven Alutiiq villagers lost their lives and several villages were permanently damaged or forced to relocate.<sup>131</sup> Betty Nelson of Afognak remembers the day as "the most horrifying thing I have ever experienced in my life," recalling that when she returned to her village, "all the familiar landmarks that we had grown up with were gone."<sup>132</sup> Like many Afognak residents, Betty and her family relocated to Port Lions, where new infrastructure was built to withstand future tsunamis. For (some) Alutiiq women, displacement meant rebuilding home and reestablishing community in a new environment.

The third major event was the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which released more than 10,000,000 gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound and along the Alaskan coastline. Oil contamination of Kodiak marine ecosystems for years killed fish, sea mammals, birds, and shellfish. Traditional food sources were considered unsafe, fishing seasons were cancelled, and many community members had to work as cleanup contractors to survive economically.<sup>133</sup> Marvin Bartleson Jr., a fisherman from Port Lions, reflects on the long-term impact of the spill:

Some things have never gone back to normal, and never will after an event like that... It affected every aspect of our lives, our subsistence way of living, and people were afraid to eat anything, even deer, because they go to the beach to eat kelp for salt.<sup>134</sup>

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130 Beukers, 'If You Want to Shoot Me, You're Welcome to It!' 40-49.

131 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 66.

132 Betty Nelson, 'A Loss of Afognak in 1964,' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 3 (2003): 26-27.

133 Counciller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 151-152.

The oil spill disrupted Alutiiq food systems in a way that Alutiiq women had not experienced before. Anxieties and uncertainties replaced the faith women had in their relationship with the land and water. The oil spill devastated the environment but also limited women's ability to fulfill their responsibilities within their communities. Together, these twentieth-century transformations showed how Alutiiq women's roles continued to be challenged by colonial economies and disasters. Despite these setbacks, they remained resilient and upheld their responsibilities to their communities and culture. Each of these crises was simultaneously attacks on the environment and an attack on the relationships and practices through which Alutiiq women sustain their communities.

## CONTEMPORARY ALUTIIQ WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

This section demonstrates how Alutiiq environmental values persist through practice, material culture, and writing, and shows that women's environmental knowledge was not eliminated by colonialism but remains central to Alutiiq identity today. Roughly two thousand Alutiiq living on Kodiak Island continue to have knowledge about and/or practice these teachings, evidence that this knowledge was successfully passed down from generation to generation. Alutiiq women ensured that their children inherited Alutiiq traditions, even when this task was difficult and dangerous. Today, the Alutiiq connect to their past because of the women and men who preserved and transmitted these traditions.

Oral traditions continue to teach environmental values about reciprocity and help the community maintain ecological balance. The balance of hunting and gathering values is preserved through practice and oral tradition. One legend, *Cestun Unguwallriat Pililuki* (How the Animals Were Created), recounts how animals first came to Kodiak and emphasizes that the relationship between humans and animals has always been grounded in reciprocity. In the narrative, a woman impregnated by a star man gives birth to all the land and sea animals. When hunting later becomes necessary, it does not destroy the relationship between man and animal; instead, it affirms the respect between the two.<sup>135</sup> As Alisha Drabek explains, stories like this “establish a close relationship to human actions (and animals) and an interdependence that manifests in family terms.”<sup>136</sup>

Material and embodied practices function as everyday actions where women share environmental knowledge, thereby sustaining cultural survivance by keeping the community's relationship with the land and its resources alive. Alutiiq women today

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134 Marvin Bartleson Jr., 'A Terrible Tragedy Never Forgotten,' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 4 (2004): 10–13.

135 Chya and Steffian, *Unigkuat*, 28.

136 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 150.

continue weaving baskets from spruce root and beach rye, objects traditionally used to store food, fish, or water. Contemporary basket-weaving classes serve as a workshop to learn new skills and also as a communal gathering where environmental knowledge is exchanged.<sup>137</sup> Women also continue to create oil for traditional stone lamps from sea mammal fat, jewellery from fur, bones, or seashells, and to clean fish and sea mammals for traditional meals. Marie Skonberg, an elder from Ouizinkie, makes her own beaded headdresses and explains that “the more of us native people who know how to bead, or make beaded headdresses, the better off we’ll be, as it’s a symbol of what we are.”<sup>138</sup>

Trish Abston-Cox shows how this knowledge is passed down through several generations of women: she learned headdress-making under the mentorship of Dee Dee Chya, Margaret Roberts, and her own mother, Virginia. These all were Alutiiq women who led efforts to preserve regalia and dance.<sup>139</sup> These headdresses are often worn at Alutiiq dancers’ performances. Since the late twentieth century, Alutiiq dancing groups have experienced a revival across Kodiak. While dances were historically held at hunting festivals, they are now held at community celebrations. Cox was a founding member of the Kodiak Alutiiq dancers and now teaches both adults and children in Larsen Bay and Kodiak. She sees herself still as a student “learning with each and every headdress [she] makes.”<sup>140</sup> Wanda Price, an Alutiiq dancer and teacher from Old Harbor, explains how today she dances “because [she doesn’t] want the culture to be forgotten and to teach our children that our heritage is very strong.”<sup>141</sup> Melissa Berns from Old Harbor extends these revived practices to skin sewing, basket weaving, and the creation of traditional regalia. She describes these practices as a spiritual journey which allows her to have “a glimpse into the past and history of my Alutiiq ancestors and [which] will provide me with the tools to move forward incorporating modern traditions with the skills of the past.”<sup>142</sup> While raising her children, Melissa ensured that they were exposed to the dancing of their community. When cleaning hides given to her by hunters, she thinks of her ancestors’ tools and aspires to document old techniques for future generations.<sup>143</sup> These women show how Alutiiq material practices embody the centuries-old reciprocal relationship between women and their environment.

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137 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’s tun*, 150.

138 Marie Skonberg, ‘Marie Skonberg and the Art of Beading’ *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no.3 (2003): 20-21.

139 Trish Abston-Cox, Alutiiq Museum, <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/alutiiq-people/art/artist-gallery/trish-abston-cox>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

140 Trish Abston-Cox, Alutiiq Museum.

141 Wanda Price, ‘They Put Your Culture Inside You,’ *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 4 (2004): 16-17.

142 Melissa Berns, Alutiiq Museum, <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/alutiiq-people/art/artist-gallery/melissa-berns/>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

143 Melissa Berns, Alutiiq Museum.

Contemporary reproductive and healing practices offer a more complicated picture than straightforward revitalization. Some practices, like the steam bath, persist as a part of daily community life; it remains an active space where women support one another through physical and emotional care. Margie Mete notes that the community has steadily reclaimed the Alutiiq term *maqiwik* over the Russian term *banya*.<sup>144</sup> Other practices, for example, midwifery, have largely been displaced by Western healthcare systems, and their survival has depended on documentation and transmission through scholarship, oral history projects, and community-produced materials rather than on an uninterrupted practice. Mete observes that although cultural revitalization is being cultivated on Kodiak, decolonization is a process as well as an event, and identifying and reestablishing Alutiiq health customs that became less visible following colonization remains ongoing work.<sup>145</sup> This article is itself part of that effort, bringing together in one place the reproductive and healing knowledge that colonialism sought to fragment and suppress, so that it remains accessible rather than lost.

The healthcare environment on Kodiak reflects this complexity. KANA, The Kodiak Area Native Association, founded in 1966, provides health and social services to Alutiiq communities across the Kodiak archipelago through a compact with the Indian Health Service under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975.<sup>146</sup> As a tribally governed organization, KANA has significantly greater community control than a facility operated directly by IHS, and its staff includes Indigenous healthcare providers who work to incorporate Alutiiq cultural values into care. Yet the integration of traditional healing within KANA remains limited. Mete notes that while a traditional healer was once available through KANA, that person has retired, and KANA clients who wish to access a traditional healer must now be referred to Anchorage.<sup>147</sup> Further, several Alutiiq individuals are recognized by the community for their healing abilities but are not formally acknowledged by KANA.<sup>148</sup> KANA operates within a federal funding structure that is overshadowed by IHS's chronic underfunding, Western medical frameworks, and the forced sterilization and discriminatory care that Alaska Native women across the country continue to navigate.<sup>149</sup> These limitations are federal in origin, and the effort to decolonize care is being carried out by the Alutiiq community.

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144 Margaret Susan Draskovich Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization: Pathways to Holistic Individual Health and Community Wellness* (PhD diss., University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2021), 197.

145 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 28, 60-61.

146 'About,' Kodiak Area Native Association, <https://kodiakhealthcare.org>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

147 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 60-61.

148 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 60-61.

149 Jane Lawrence, 'The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women,' *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 400-419.

Within this tension, Indigenous physicians like Dr. Elise Pletnikoff, Chief Medical Officer of KANA, represent a significant shift. Born and raised on Kodiak, Dr. Pletnikoff brings traditional values and relational care into clinical practice.<sup>150</sup> She delivers babies for families she has known for years, always asking after mothers before asking about symptoms.<sup>151</sup> Her presence signals that Alutiiq women's bodily knowledge and Western medicine do not have to be opposed, and that Indigenous healers within institutional medicine can begin to close the gap that colonialism opened.

Several more isolated villages continue to rely on Community Health Aides who provide prenatal and postnatal care and who serve as liaisons between their villages and the western medical world; many are also descended from traditional healers.<sup>152</sup> Broader Indigenous movements, including the Indigenous Rematriate Milk Medicine movement and the growing effort to de-taboo menstruation within Indigenous communities, offer frameworks for the kind of healing that remains to be done on Kodiak.<sup>153</sup> This points towards a future on Kodiak in which Alutiiq women's bodily knowledge is not only preserved in documents, but actively lived and practiced in the community itself. Traditional breastfeeding practices declined among Indigenous communities due to both colonial disruption and deliberate formula marketing, which portrayed bottle feeding as modern and sophisticated.<sup>154</sup>

Language revitalization is another arena in which women's knowledge-keeping is central. The Alutiiq language conveys ecological relationships in a way that English cannot. Alisha Drabek discusses her journey of learning the Alutiiq language as an adult, after her family experienced generations of separation from their language due to colonization. She shares how the word for sea or ocean is *imaq*, which also means 'a liquid contained inside' or

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150 Michael Woestehoff, 'Celebrating Dr. Elise Pletnikoff and the Power of Representation in Native American Healthcare,' *Ellsworth*, <https://ellsworth.solutions/celebrating-dr-elise-pletnikoff-and-the-power-of-representation-in-native-american-healthcare/>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

151 Woestehoff, 'Celebrating Dr. Elise Pletnikoff.'

152 'Midwife — Paapuskaa,' *Alutiiq Word of the Day*, Alutiiq Museum, <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/collection/Detail/word/345>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

153 Ariel Hansen, 'Rematriating Milk Medicine: Indigenous Breastfeeding Rates on the Rise,' *The Science Writer*, last accessed 12 December 2024, <https://www.thesciencewriter.org/issue-1/rematriating-milk-medicine-indigenous-breastfeeding-rates-on-the-rise>; 'Period Practices in Indigenous Cultures,' *Help a Girl Out*, <https://helpagirlout.org/period-practices-in-indigenous-cultures/>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

154 Cecília Tomori and Aunchalee E. L. Palmquist, 'Racial Capitalism and the US Formula Shortage: A Policy Analysis of the Formula Industry as a Neocolonial System,' *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (2022): 961200; Carla Cevasco, 'Look'd Like Milk': Colonialism and Infant Feeding in the English Atlantic World,' *Journal of Early American History* (2020); Hiliary Monteith, Carly Checholik, Tracey Galloway, Hosna Sahak, Amy Shawanda, Christina Liu, and Anthony J. G. Hanley, 'Infant Feeding Experiences among Indigenous Communities in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Aotearoa: A Scoping Review of the Qualitative Literature,' *BMC Public Health* 24, no. 1583 (2024).

'contents.' This word relates to the phrase *imartuq*, meaning 'it is full,' and *imaituq*, meaning 'it is empty.' This means that when you say *imasuugtua* — 'I am sad' — the literal translation is 'I am searching for my contents.'<sup>155</sup> This evidently shows how the Alutiiq worldview, language, and the ecological realm are intertwined. She is passing this language to her sons through Alutiiq names for stuffed animals, traditional lullabies, and a language playgroup.<sup>156</sup> Drabek follows in the steps of Alutiiq women before her who have passed knowledge across generations.

Subsistence practices also continued to be transmitted through women's inter-generational teaching. In Margie Mete's study of Alutiiq healing practices, one participant described how her mother took her children into the wilderness to identify plants, pick berries, and hunt, teaching them to say a prayer and give something back before each harvest. "They weren't big teaching moments," she explains, "but small teaching moments that you look back and you culminate, and you make a whole lifestyle."<sup>157</sup> This lesson is rooted in the reciprocity between Alutiit and the land. It echoes the creation legend presented earlier in this section, in which the hunting does not sever the relationship between humans and animals but affirms it through respect. This is the same logic the mother enacts when she teaches her children to pray and give something back before each harvest. The legend establishes this principle at the level of cosmology, and the small daily teaching moment shares it across generations. This demonstrates how oral tradition and daily practice reinforce one another.

Contemporary Alutiiq writing offers another form of evidence to explore the environmental values passed down, demonstrating how land and water serve as memory and archive, and how women are the knowledge bearers within this relationship. Abigail Chabitnoy, an Alutiiq poet, writes in her poem *Water Lines* that the sea appears as a relational being rather than an expanse or boundary on a map. Water functions as memory and archive as she writes, "what we preserve:: what we pass down:: what continues:: to be spoken:: into being."<sup>158</sup> Women adopt the role of knowledge bearers in her poem, described as those who "hold the bottom of the sea to their breasts," and who "keep/ she keeps in the water she keeps/ even among large waves."<sup>159</sup> These lines position women as the stabilizing forces within relationships between the community and the

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155 Alisha Drabek, 'Learning How to Speak with My Ancestors,' *Sierra. The Magazine of the Sierra Club*, Sierra Club, November 9, 2018, <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2018-6-november-december/last-words/learning-how-speak-my-ancestors>. Last accessed 7 May 2026.

156 Drabek, 'Learning How to Speak with My Ancestors.'

157 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 166.

158 Abigail Chabitnoy, 'Water Lines,' in *Circumpolar Connections: Creative Indigenous Geographies of the Arctic*, ed. Liisa-Rávná Finbog, Joan Naviyuk Kane, and Johannes Riquet (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2024), 44.

159 Chabitnoy, 'Water Lines,' 48-49.

environment and as teachers of subsistence practices. By presenting water as memory and women as its stewards, Chabitnoy's work demonstrates that environmental Alutiiq values are not only being practiced but also being actively shared through story and art. The poem closes with a reflection about survivance: "to tell the story one survived/ to tell the story who survived/ tell the sea ship water down."<sup>160</sup> This ending reinforces the endurance of Alutiiq knowledge despite colonial disruption and the responsibility to continue carrying and sharing it.

## CONCLUSION

Russian and American colonial regimes fundamentally reshaped Alutiiq women's reciprocal relationship with the environment by disrupting subsistence labour, regulating women's health, and redefining domestic and economic life. As this article has shown, these interventions challenged women's autonomy and diverted their environmental knowledge towards colonial economies through the fur trade, canneries, mission schools, militarization, and environmental disaster. These pressures did not eradicate Alutiiq women's reciprocal relationship with the environment; instead, women continually adapted and negotiated environmental practices within their families and communities.

Across the precolonial, Russian, and American periods, Alutiiq women remained central to subsistence labour, reproductive and healing practices, and the sharing of environmental values. Through food preparation, midwifery, breastfeeding, menstrual practices, material production, and storytelling, women sustained their cultural values grounded in reciprocity, even as colonial forces sought to control and change them. The evidence presented exemplifies how women's labour was not static or coerced, but rather how Alutiiq women exercised agency by choosing when to adapt and participate.

In the contemporary period, Alutiiq women continue this work through the revitalization of subsistence labour, material culture, reproductive and healing knowledge, and storytelling. As Cutcha Risling Baldy describes, this process is the work of (re)righting, (re)writing, and (re)riteing Indigenous epistemologies and recentering women as cultural and environmental knowledge bearers.<sup>161</sup> Sherri Mitchell's articulation of recovering heart-based wisdom further illuminates how these practices reflect a reassertion of women's authority and responsibility within their communities.<sup>162</sup>

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160 Chabitnoy, 'Water Lines,' 50.

161 Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing For You*, 11.

162 Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions*, 121-122.

By tracing Alutiiq women's environmental roles over time, this article demonstrates how colonial forces disrupted but did not destroy the relationship Alutiiq women have with the environment. Rather than cast as passive actors in the story of colonial destruction, Alutiiq women emerge as agents of cultural survivance whose environmental knowledge sustained community continuity under coercive conditions. Centring these histories expands environmental and gender history by foregrounding Indigenous women's lived experiences and by recognizing matricultural systems as foundational to reciprocal ecological relationships.

Ultimately, this analysis also extends beyond the Kodiak Archipelago. Recognizing Alutiiq women's environmental knowledge as a living and adaptive value system challenges dominant environmental frameworks that continue to privilege extraction over reciprocity. At this moment of ecological crisis, these histories correct colonial narratives of loss and serve as a model for sustainable relationships with the environment grounded in responsibility and balance. At the same time, they illuminate how entangled environmental and bodily sovereignty is; colonial efforts to control land have always been connected to their attempts to regulate Indigenous women's bodies. The persistence of midwifery, breastfeeding, and communal care represents cultural continuity and reassertion of authority over land and life. Ignoring the interconnectedness of these two systems risks reproducing colonial frameworks that erode environment and bodily autonomy, but centring them opens up possibilities for thinking about how they work together to sustain environmental and reproductive futures. Therefore, Alutiiq women's practices are critical interventions into broader discussions on environmental and reproductive justice.

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