

Cauyaq – DRUM



*Skin covered drum, Kodiak Island, 1872,
Pinart Collection, Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.*

In the traditional Alutiiq language, the word for drum and music are the same—*cauyaq*. This duplication illustrates the importance of drums to traditional Alutiiq/Sugpiaq music. Although Alutiiq people also perform with rattles and whistles, the drum, with its penetrating beat, is their main instrument.

Drumming is an ancient practice. Prehistoric petroglyphs from both Afognak and Kodiak Islands show people holding drums, and archaeological sites with well-preserved wooden artifacts include drum handles and drum rims many hundreds of years old. Historic accounts also indicate that drumming was an important part of the Alutiiq past. Until the late 19th century, Alutiiq people sang and danced in honor of ancestors, reenacted stories, shared community history, and called spirits to their winter festivals to the rhythmic pulse of skin drums.

MAKING DRUMS

Like the drums of Yup'ik and Inupiaq peoples, Alutiiq drums are large, circular instruments designed for individual players. Made in many sizes, Alutiiq drums have unique features. Each has a large wooden hoop made from a narrow, oval-shaped piece of wood bent to shape with steam. To close the hoop, carvers drill holes in the end of the wood strip and lash the ends together. To this frame, some artists attach a cross brace, a piece of wood that provides extra support.

Next, drum makers stretch a bear lung, a seal bladder, or even a halibut stomach over the hoop to form the drum's cover. They secure the edges of the skin by tying it to a thin groove that encircles the outside edge of the wooden hoop. The last step is to lash on a sturdy handle. Each handle features a notch to hold the drum rim, with a beautifully carved image on the inside.

Like other ceremonial objects, Alutiiq people decorated their drums. A drum's skin might be painted with images of spirit helpers, or its handle painted and adorned with carvings of people or animals. A prehistoric drum handle from Karluk shows a human face inset with two tiny animal teeth. Some drum handles had tiny masks attached. These carvings faced the audience as the drummer played.

Cauyaq nitniq'gkiu.

- Listen to the drum.

Alutiiq people beat their drums with a rounded stick called *kaugsuun*—"something for hitting." The drummer controls the tone of his instrument by varying the location and intensity of his strike. Sometimes he may hit the rim of the drum, other times its skin surface.

A musician can also change the sound of a drum by altering the tightness of its skin cover. Drum skins are sensitive to moisture. By wetting the skin, the cover loosens, creating a deeper sound. Hold the drum near the fire and the warmth dries the skin, causing it to constrict and the tone of the instrument to rise. Today, some Alaskan drummers carry spray bottles to fine-tune their instruments during performances.

LISTEN:

Generations, An Alutiiq Music Collection, 2007,
CD produced by Stephen Blanchett for the Alutiiq
Museum, Kodiak.