

Kasuucipet – MARRIAGE TRADITIONS



In classical Alutiiq/Sugpiaq society, before the introduction of Christian marriage traditions, preparation for marriage began at puberty. At the onset of her menstrual period, a girl was secluded in a special hut for at least ten days. This prevented her new and powerful life-giving abilities from polluting hunting gear or diminishing the hunting luck of the men in her family. This ritual separation also marked her transition into womanhood. When she emerged from seclusion, she received chin tattoos, fine black lines that signaled her readiness for marriage.

Marriages were either arranged or formed by mutual consent. A couple might approach their parents for permission to marry, or parents might plan their children's engagement. Alutiiq people formalized marriages with valuable gifts. Prospective in-laws exchanged items to symbolize their acceptance of a union. With the gifts bestowed, the groom went to live with his bride, working to assist her family. There was no formal ceremony at the time of marriage, although some families recognized new unions with celebrations at winter festivals. After marriage, a woman might add additional tattoos to her body or hands as a sign of love for her husband.

Marriages were usually monogamous—one man married one woman. However, polyandry—marriage to multiple husbands—did occur. Wealthy women would sometimes marry a second husband to assist with household chores. Similarly, men could have two or more wives. Chiefs and shamans, in particular, were known to have multiple spouses.

Some of the women have two husbands; the first is the real one and he selects the second with the consent of his wife. The second husband plays largely the role of servant, and can assume the role of husband only when the first is absent.

G. Davydov, Russian naval officer, 1802-1803

Divorce was possible, but not common. When a couple decided to split, the man simply moved out of the house. Any children remained with their mother, and both parents were free to remarry immediately without social stigma. In the historic era, as Alutiiq people adopted the Russian Orthodox faith, they began to practice Christian marriage customs.



Sheratin wedding, Afognak village, ca. 1914. Alutiiq people began adopting Western marriage practices in the 19th century. Photograph by Dennis Winn, McCubrey Collection.