

# ***Ag'inartuq***

**“that which is important within and deserves respect”**

**- Mary Haakanson, Elder 2004**

The Alutiiq Museum’s Guidelines for the Spiritual Care of Objects

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## **A PHILOSOPHY FOR COLLECTIONS CARE**

According to Alutiiq/Sugpiaq tradition, everything in the universe – the wind and the animals, the rocks and the trees, has a *sua*, a human-like consciousness. To Alutiit/Sugpiat people, the world is alive. It is a place where all objects are sentient - aware of and sensitive to human action. Caring for this world requires reverence – respect for natural resources, recognition of the accomplishments of ancestors, and a modest view of one’s place on earth. Alutiit/Sugpiat do not see themselves as conquerors of the land, but believe that they are one component of a complexly integrated, cyclical, life-giving system. In this system, the resources necessary for life give themselves to people, who must prove their worth through responsible acts. Traditionally, people dress neatly to show respect for the animals whose skins they wear. Hunters give the sea otter a drink of fresh water before butchering the animal and releasing its bones into the ocean so that the spirit of the animal may live to propagate. In this world carelessness, waste, and poor repair are signs of disrespect. They unsettle the natural balance and can poison a person’s luck.

Following this worldview, the Alutiiq Museum believes that caring for ancestral objects requires much more than maintaining their physical stability. Because all Alutiiq/Sugpiaq objects are animate, they are all sacred at the most basic level. The *sua* of the tree, that gives its wood to the carver to produce a bowl, continues to require respect. The carver shows his reverence by using the wood judiciously, by wasting little and creating a beautiful object that celebrates the tree’s gift. Although ancient carvers could not imagine the role their crafts would play in twenty-first century Alutiiq/Sugpiaq society, the rules that govern the spiritual care of objects persist. To respect the gifts of spirits, objects made from natural materials must be kept clean, safe and in good repair. Moreover, their connections to ancestral societies and the natural world must be recognized and honored.

As a modern-day steward of ancestral objects, the Alutiiq Museum’s is responsible for meeting these needs. We approach collections care by combining the best Western

conservation techniques (for physical stability) with practices that reflect Sugpiaq<sup>1</sup> values (for spiritual care). Like Sugpiaq people of all eras, we use the best technologies available in ways that are uniquely Alutiiq/Sugpiaq. For example, we store stone oil lamps in seats of archival quality foam on non-off gassing, baked enamel, space-saver shelving, but they are stored upside down, a practice that keeps their spirits from departing.

Beyond the inherent need to respect all things, the museum recognizes that some artifacts have a deeper spiritual significance. Ceremonial gear, funerary objects, shamanic objects and whalers' tools are more powerful artifacts. Some of these objects are religious equipment, once used to communicate directly with the spirit world that influenced life on earth. Others contain personal power – the essence of an individual's spirit. In traditional society, these objects were separated from daily life – kept in private places and accessed only by those capable of managing their power.

Masks, for example, were created for ceremonial dance performances. Carvings depicting human and/or animal faces called spirits to gatherings that honored the power of the supernatural, reaffirmed the place of people in the world, and paid homage to forbearers who perpetuated life, all of which served to insure future prosperity. After these events, carvers hid or destroyed their masks to protect people from their power. Some were secreted away. Others were placed in storage boxes or simply burned or broken to release their power.

Extending very special treatment to religious artifacts, therefore, mirrors traditional practices of caring for cultural property. By honoring the cultural perceptions that existed when artifacts were made, we maintain their integrity in the modern world. When treated appropriately, Sugpiaq artifacts cease to be historical curiosities. Culturally appropriate care reunites the objects with their cultural context, honors their *sua*, and gives the objects life.

## **CREATING GUIDELINES**

In recognition of traditional Sugpiaq methods of creating, using and caring for objects, the Alutiiq Museum has established the following guidelines to assist its board, staff, volunteers, and patrons in interacting respectfully with cultural materials – particularly sacred objects. Although separate from our collections policy and collections procedures, these guidelines are equal and integral parts of our approach to providing culturally appropriate artifact care. At the Alutiiq Museum, preserving and sharing

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that as the people on Kodiak reawakened their cultural values and knowledge they learned that their real name is Sugpiaq, translated means 'the human being', Alutiiq is the name of our language. It is important to note that the community's growth and awareness of knowing their ancestors and who they are today by calling themselves "Sugpiaq", their real name, they are taking back their heritage.

Sugpiaq traditions means more than creating educational programs around traditional objects, it means enlivening Sugpiaq traditions by recognizing and incorporating traditional practices into our approach to museum science.

Developing guidelines for the spiritual care of objects is a difficult, on-going process. Western hegemony led to the rapid suppression of Sugpiaq traditions and massive cultural change. The religious practices of classical Sugpiaq society, particularly foreign and incomprehensible to Western colonists, were among the first targeted for repression. Today, cultural knowledge about sacred practices is limited – stored in a few Elders and documented in rare anthropological accounts. Moreover, two centuries of Western religious practice have significantly altered perceptions of sacredness. Definitions of the sacred vary between Sugpiaq people who have adopted different religions (e.g., Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Baptist, Later Day Saints) and among people of different generations. There is no uniform definition of sacred Sugpiaq objects.

Ironically, many Sugpiaq Elder Alutiiqs with knowledge of traditional spirituality are hesitant to share their wisdom. Chastised for their Aleut/Alutiiqness/Nativeness as young people, they often see traditional religious beliefs as embarrassing, old-fashioned, and superceded by the principles of their Judeo-Christian faiths. In contrast, younger generations, who live in an increasingly open-minded world, are anxious to add a deeper dimension of Sugpiaq experience to their lives. This leads to differing perception of sacredness.

Take for example an elaborately decorated spruce root hat – a garment reflecting wealth and elite status in classical Sugpiaq society. To some, this is a religious artifact, as it was likely worn at ceremonial occasions. To others, however, it is a beautiful but functional item, as woven hats were also worn for daily activities. Still others might suggest that regardless of its original use, changes in cultural practice over two centuries have rendered the hat most valuable as an educational tool. In other words, its function is now secular. Another group might argue that the hat is sacred because it is a gift from the past. It represents an irreplaceable piece of history whose spiritual power lies in the present, in its ability to uplift and inspire.

In light of these varying perceptions of what is sacred, we view the guidelines presented below as a starting place for establishing culturally meaningful collections care. While they are based on our knowledge of classical Sugpiaq society, we recognize and honor the multiplicity of views on cultural property in the Sugpiaq community. The guidelines presented here are simply a first attempt, by a developing cultural organization, to integrate Native values with museum practices. As concepts of Sugpiaq spirituality grow, these guidelines will require revision.

In 2007, Kodiak's Sugpiaq community formed regional repatriation commission. Known as the Kodiak Alutiiq Sugpiag Repatriation Commission, this body works to facilitate the return of Alutiiq / Sugpiaq ancestral remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony and sacred

objects; to insure the respectful, culturally appropriate treatment of ancestral remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony and sacred objects ; and to educate museums holding ancestral collections about Alutiiq / Sugpiaq traditions so they may care appropriately for collections that cannot be repatriated.

The Commission's manual summarizes the Commission's island-wide vision for the repatriation and the long-term care of ancestral remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony, sacred objects and Alutiiq / Sugpiaq cultural objects. The Commission members and the commission's manual are resources the Alutiiq Museum uses to guide its collections care activities, share knowledge of Sugpiaq traditions, and promote the respectful treatment of ancestral objects that cannot be repatriated.

In coming years, the Commission may assist in formally identifying sacred objects and building consensus about their treatment. This will include working with Russian Orthodox Church leaders to identify sacred Orthodox objects and their appropriate treatment, as the Russian Orthodox faith has been part of the Alutiiq religious experience since the nineteenth century. We look forward to improving the museum's care of artifacts with help from the commission and the modern religious community.

Finally, the guidelines presented below are intentionally flexible. Unlike the technical standards for collections care, which can be often specified with precision, we believe that the spiritual care of objects requires a more open-minded approach. We feel that this is particularly important in an era so culturally distant for the one in which many of the artifacts we care for were manufactured. We find ourselves in the position of balancing museum resources (space, staff time, funding) and our community's thirst for cultural education, with traditional practice. As such, these guidelines do not present a rigid formula for managing the spiritual needs of objects, but a process for insuring that the care and use of objects is always carefully evaluated.

## **IDENTIFYING SACRED OBJECTS**

All objects require respectful treatment to maintain their integrity and please their *sua*. As such, the guidelines presented below include provisions for the spiritually sensitive care of all objects in the museum's holdings. Additionally, however, the Alutiiq Museum recognizes five classes of religious items that have the potential to be considered sacred. These objects were identified with the help of oral histories, anthropological research and historical accounts and do not necessarily represent a complete list of sacred items. Furthermore, not all items from each context are necessarily considered sacred. Each object must be individually evaluated to ascertain its cultural context and potential meaning.

**1. Ceremonial Items:** Objects used in religious practices that were specifically designed to interact with the spirit world, particularly those used in winter hunting festivals. This category of objects includes masks of all sizes (plank masks, portrait masks, and

maskettes), musical instruments (drums and rattles), and some ceremonial clothing (parkas, headdresses, dance belts, jewelry).

**2. Shamanic Tools:** Objects used in the performance of shamanic tasks such as healing, communicating with the spirit world, and foretelling the future. This category of objects includes shaman's dolls, masks, amulets, whistles, rattles and clothing (belts, aprons, bracelets, headdresses)

**3. Whaling Gear:** Objects used by whalers in preparation for and execution of the hunt. This category of objects includes preparatory gear (model boats, tools for making aconite poison), hunting amulets, hunting tools, and special clothing (pointed hats, rattles). This category may also include any materials from a whaler's cave.

**4. Church Artifacts:** Objects used in the practice of Judeo-Christian faiths, including crosses, icons, bibles, vestments, and other religious furnishings.

**5. Funerary Objects:** Objects intentionally placed in a human grave, or created with the intent to be buried with an individual at or around the time of death. Funerary objects may include grave markers, grave furniture (boxes, caskets, urns, etc.), and burial goods (personal effects, burial pillow stuffed with a person's hair, a box of nail clippings).

### **Identifying Additional Sacred Items**

The museum recognizes that there are other Sugpiaq objects that could be considered sacred. When information on such objects becomes available, we will follow the steps outlined below to assess the sacredness of the item.

1. Remove the object from public access in both our gallery and collection storage area.
2. Store the object in an area designated for sacred objects.
3. Talk to Elders about the potential sacredness of the object, documenting their knowledge as fully as possible.
4. Conduct research on the object in anthropological text, historic accounts, and the museum's archives.
5. Hold a discussion among the staff to review the results of oral testimonies and research and form a staff opinion.
6. Refer the staff opinion to the Museum Director for consideration.
7. If an object is deemed sacred, implement a procedure for handling / viewing / sharing information about this type of object.

### **CARING FOR SACRED OBJECTS**

The Alutiiq Museums is a steward of artifacts. It is our responsibility to care for the objects of Sugpiaq heritage. All objects entrusted to the museum, whether they belonging to the organization or are on loan, fall under the provisions of three policies.

These are (1) Our board approved collections management policy that specifies the legal and administrative control of collections, (2) our collections procedures manual that establishes guidelines for the physical care of collections, and (3) the guidelines for the spiritual care of Sugpiaq objects presented herein.

#### General Responsibilities

- Every staff member is responsible for the safety of museum objects and has the responsibility to follow the guidelines set forth in all documents governing collections care – administrative, physical and spiritual.
- Upon employment, all staff members will sign a pledge to respect both the physical and spiritual status of the objects in the museum's holdings as well as cultural views towards museum objects expressed by co-workers and patrons. Breaches of respect will be managed like any other personnel issue following the guidelines established in the museum's board established personnel policy.
- No staff member will be required to handle sacred items or human remains against their will. Staff members who are uncomfortable with a potential task should inform their supervisor.
- All decisions regarding the spiritual care of artifacts will be finalized by the museum director after consulting with the museum board, staff, Elders, community members, and museum policies as needed.

#### Incoming Materials

- The museum curator will question all potential lender / donors to the museum's collections about all incoming materials to determine whether sacred materials are present and to ascertain the lender's / donor's wishes for their spiritual care.
- The museum will not accept the sacred cultural property or human remains of another Native American group without a written request for assistance from that group. Patrons offering potentially sacred material associated with another Native culture will be referred to representatives of that culture.
- When asked, the museum will assist all Kodiak Sugpiaq groups in bring culturally sacred materials and human remains back to Kodiak so they may be cared for by the community whose heritage and values they most closely reflect.
- The museum will not accession human remains. However, human remains may be temporarily housed in the collections storage room by request of the nearest related Sugpiaq group, while additional arrangements for their care are made.

#### Conservation

- Because Sugpiaq objects must be maintained in the best possible condition to honor their *sua*, show respect for past generations, and keep objects alive in the modern day, sacred objects entrusted to the museum's care may be cleaned and conserved as necessary.
- As a general rule, conservation techniques will be limited. Museum staff will endeavor to do the least amount of conservation work necessary to stabilize and preserve sacred objects.

- Where possible, conservation and exhibition technique will take into account traditional techniques of caring for cultural materials.

#### Daily Care

- The daily care of the collections is the responsibility of the museum's curatorial staff, led by the museum's curator. The curator will oversee the implementation of all guidelines for the spiritual care of artifacts and lead efforts to address issues regarding spiritual care as they arise.
- As a general rule, sacred items will be handled as little as possible by museum staff to maintain their physical and spiritual integrity.
- The curatorial staff of the museum will seek to integrate traditional methods of artifact care into its daily management of collections. This includes storing materials in culturally appropriate ways, using Alutiiq terms in labeling storage areas, and handling materials in cultural sensitive ways.
- The curatorial staff of the museum will seek to enhance the documentation of the spiritual nature and needs of objects in the museum's holdings whenever possible.
- Specific requirements for the spiritually sensitive care of certain types of artifacts will be outlined in the museum's procedures manual. (e.g., all oil lamps are to be stored upside down when not in use, whaling gear will be stored separately from all other materials, bear skulls will be oriented to north, north east and bear will be handle by men whenever possible).
- In recognition of the fact that hunting equipment was traditionally handled by men only, the Alutiiq museum will strive to have male employees oversee the care and handling of all hunting related artifacts. However, as maintaining the safety and physical integrity of these objects is of great importance, and as the male employees are not always available to complete collections care, the museum recognizes that there will be instances where women will be involved in the care of hunting weaponry. When this occurs, female employs will limit their contact with weaponry by wearing gloves, handling boxes not objects, etc.
- Object acquisition records are not necessarily public information. Data contained in the Museum's acquisition records will be available to the public on a limited basis. Certain types of information (e.g., sacred knowledge associated with an artifact) may be kept private.
- Access to all sacred information in the museum's acquisition files will be provided at the discretion of the museum's director and curator. People granted access to such information may be required to sign a confidentiality statement.
- The management of sacred objects will be outlined in the museum's emergency preparedness plan, so that sacred materials can be appropriately cared for in the event of a disaster. A staff member will be specifically assigned to implement this plan and oversee the treatment of sacred materials and their accompanying documentation.

### Lending & Borrowing

- Sacred materials, excluding human remains and funerary objects, may be lent to other organizations if (1) a compelling reasons for such a loan exists, (2) the proposed use of the object is in keeping with the physical and spiritual needs and use of the objects (e.g., for use in a ceremony), and (3) the borrowing organization or individual can provide the appropriate physical and spiritual care.
- The museum will consider the spiritual care of an object before it is borrowed from another organization or an individual. No sacred material will be borrowed unless provisions for its spiritual care can be properly met.

### Deaccessions

- The museum will consider the spiritual care of an object before it is deaccessioned. No sacred material will be deaccessioned without a provision for its spiritual care.
- Destruction of sacred items (e.g., burning, breaking and discarding - traditional method of disposal), may be considered for objects that required disposal.

## **VIEWING SACRED OBJECTS**

### Sacred Artifacts on Exhibit

- Sacred artifacts may be placed on exhibit when (1) there is a compelling reason for their display – e.g., as an integral part of an exhibition – and (2) the conditions of display do not violate any conditions established for the care or viewing of that object.
- The decision to display such items will be made in consultations between the museum director, the curatorial staff and the owner / lender of the sacred artifact.
- When sacred items are placed on display, they will be appropriately labeled and secluded to allow visitor to decided whether or not to view these items.
- Where it is not appropriate to display a sacred item (e.g., in a traveling exhibition whose display that the museum cannot control), a museum quality replica of the item may be substituted with an appropriate label indicating that the object is a replica.
- Human remains and images of human remains will not be displayed in museum exhibits or used in educational outreach programs.

### Sacred Artifacts in Storage

- Sacred items will be stored in specially designated and labeled areas of the Alutiiq Museum's collections room.
- Sacred artifacts stored in the Alutiiq Museum's collections room may be viewed when (1) there is a compelling reason – e.g., a community sanctioned research



project and (2) viewing does not violate any conditions established for the care of that object.

- The decision to show such items will be made in consultations between the museum director, the curatorial staff and the owner / lender of the sacred artifact.
- Sacred artifacts will not be shown on general tours of the collections room, although tour guides are encouraged to explain that such materials are receiving special care.
- People who wish to view sacred items will be required to make an appointment with the curator at least 3 days in advance so the request can be considered and arrangements for the proper handling of the object made (e.g., permission from object owners).

#### Human Remains

- The museum will maintain a special area of its collections room for the temporary storage of human remains. Cabinets in this area will be labeled and locked to prevent inadvertent viewing.
- Human remains in storage will not be shown to museum patrons (researchers, artists, visitors, students, etc.) without the signed, written consent of the nearest related Sugpiaq group.

#### **USING SACRED OBJECTS**

- Sacred objects, excluding human remains and funerary objects, may be used in events (museum sponsored, public or private; on site or off site) when (1) a compelling reason for this use exists, (2) the proposed use does not violate any conditions established for the care or viewing of that object, and (3) the proposed use is in keeping with the culturally intended use of the object.
- The decision to permit such uses will be made in consultations between the museum director, the curatorial staff, the owner / lender of the sacred artifact and the proposed user.
- Any use of sacred materials in the museum facility (from the museum's holdings or of private ownership) must be sanctioned by the museum director. The director will consider all such requests to insure there is no adverse effect to the sacred material, the museum's staff, patrons, other materials or facilities.
- Any privately owned sacred material brought to the museum must be registered with the museum's director or curator to keep it separate from the museum's holdings and protect the rights of the owner.
- In loaning sacred material to be used in events outside the museum facility, the museum will work with individual lenders to evaluate the proposed use and establish procedures for insuring the physical and spiritual care of the objects if the use is approved. This may include assigning a staff member to accompany

- the object to and from its destination, the use of special packaging materials, etc. to insure the physical and spiritual integrity of the object.
- Staff members are discouraged from bringing personally owned sacred materials to work, unless there is a compelling reason for their presence (e.g., for personal use in a museum sanctioned event, to meet a personal spiritual need).

## **MANGING CONFLICTS**

As a cultural center funded and governed by eight Kodiak Sugpiaq organizations, the Alutiiq Museum serves the Sugpiaq Nation first. As such, the museum is dedicated to establishing policies and procedures that meet the needs of Sugpiaq people before those of others. However, as Sugpiaq people benefit greatly from public awareness of their culture, and as the museum is a public non-profit organization dedicated to community education, the museum seeks to involve people of all heritages in the preservation and celebration of Sugpiaq culture.

While sharing sacred materials with the public helps us educate our broader community about the spiritually rich aspects of Sugpiaq culture, not all sacred objects and sacred knowledge are appropriate for a public forum. When conflicts between the stewardship of sacred objects and requests for public access arise, the museum will follow its Sugpiaq First philosophy in resolving these conflicts. Preference will be given to maintaining the spiritual integrity of objects, adhering to Sugpiaq values and meeting the needs of Sugpiaq people in resolving these disputes.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we continue to learn about handling, caring for, and protecting the objects of Sugpiaq heritage, this policy and its implementing procedures will continue to mature. An underlying goal of all Alutiiq Museum policies is to protect Sugpiaq Heritage from being lost or forgotten. We strive to eliminate biases, tear down misunderstandings, and build respect by growing knowledge and sharing it in a respectful manner appropriate to our values. Providing culturally meaningful care to the objects entrusted to us is just one of the ways that we reach toward this goal.