



THE SOCIAL CLASSES



*The chief of Uganik village and his sons, ca. 1914.
Photograph by Dennis Winn, McCubrey Collection*

The Alaskan Gulf coast is home to three primary groups of Native peoples - the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska, the Alutiiq people of the Central Alaskan Gulf, and the Unangan or Aleut of the Aleutian Island Chain. Although each of these peoples has a distinctive culture, language and history, they share many practices. One of the most striking is social ranking. Traditional Tlingit, Alutiiq, and Aleut societies had hereditary social classes. In each, there were a small group of elite, wealthy people, a large class of commoners, and a small class of slaves. This system of ranking influenced all aspects of life, from economic activities to spiritual practices, and came to an end in the Russian period.

Among Alutiiqs, the wealthy class was also the ruling class. Each community had a chief, a member of an elite family who demonstrated his leadership abilities through generosity, bravery, and the ability to acquire

wealth. Many communities also had a second chief, a man from another wealthy family who functioned as the chief's assistant. Chiefs were responsible for political and spiritual leadership of their villages. They built and maintained a men's house where civic matters were discussed. They led war parties to avenge wrongs, obtain slaves, and gather wealth. And they hosted winter gatherings to acknowledge animal spirits, ensure future hunting luck, and honor ancestors. Chiefs and their relatives displayed their social status through elaborate dress. Parkas made from rare furs, hats decorated with dentalium shells and amber, elaborate jewelry, and tattoos on the face and shoulders all expressed the power and authority of a wealthy individual.

At the other end of the social scale were slaves - orphans and individuals captured through warfare that could be treated as property and had few personal freedoms. They could be killed, traded, or freed as their owners wished. For example, when a slave-owner died his slaves might be killed and buried with him. Slaves could only be owned by the wealthy and were an important means of securing additional riches. With slave labor a family could process and store more food for personal use and produce more goods for trade and gift giving. Thus, slavery helped wealthy families maintain and advance their social position.

LEARN MORE:

Pre-contact Political Organization and Slavery in Aleut Societies, 1983, by Joan B. Townsend. In, *The Development of Political Organization in Native North America*, edited by Elizabeth Tooker, Pp. 120-132. American Ethnological Society, Philadelphia.

Ranked Societies of the Alaskan Pacific Rim, 1980, by Joan B. Townsend. In, *Alaska Native Culture and History*, edited by Yoshinobu Kotani and William B. Workman. *Senri Ethnological Series Volume 4*, Pp. 123-156. National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.