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Heroes of Alutiiq Language History

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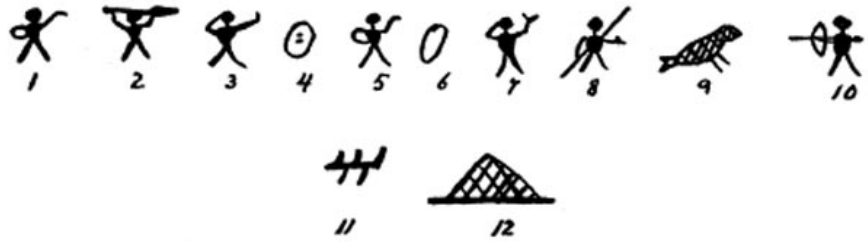
Language learning with threatened Native languages can be difficult for many reasons. Those of us who strive to reach the next rung on the ladder of language learning need all of the inspiration we can get! As a second-language speaker of my heritage language, I gain inspiration from the accomplishments of early Alutiiq linguists.

This article shares about a few of my many heroes of Alutiiq language history.

Some might find it surprising to think of historical Alutiiq figures as linguists, when the field of linguistics itself is a product of Western Civilization.

However, classical Alutiiq society put great emphasis on language and communication. Alutiiq people were often multilingual before Western contact, as it was necessary to be able to communicate with neighboring and more distant tribes for trade and travel.

In addition to learning to speak neighboring dialects, many Alutiiq people of the past used a common Northwest Coast sign language to bridge language gaps. To communicate across long distances, smoke signals were sometimes used.



Alutiiq pictographs were used to write “notes” to other people using stick figures and other simple line drawings. These pictographs tell a story: 1) A man indicating a direction, 2) that he will be going by kayak, 3) sleeping for one night 4) at an inhabited island, then 5) traveling on to 6) an uninhabited island, 7) staying for two nights, 8) hunting, 9) for sea lion 10) with bow-and-arrow, and then 11) returning 12) to his home. Collected by W.J. Hoffman (1882) from Vladimir Naumov of Afognak.

To create permanent messages, people created ownership marks and pictographs – painted images on wooden signs. They embellished their bodies, clothing, and jewelry with family and community identifiers.

These communication methods are largely forgotten due to rapid cultural changes; however, the Alutiiq people have a rich pictorial communication tradition, despite considering our language as an “oral language” – without an indigenous writing system.

Russian language was introduced here when Kodiak Island was conquered by Shelikov’s Russian American Company at the Refuge Rock Massacre in 1784. Russian and Slavonic language learning spread quickly after the introduction of Russian Orthodoxy. The adoption of Russian Orthodoxy aided many Alutiiq people according to Alisha Drabek, Ph.D., who explains, “those who were baptized and agreed to assimilate were granted citizenship and its related rights.”

Orthodox monks opened church schools, and a Cyrillic writing system was developed in collaboration between Creole Alutiiq students and

Russian Orthodox clergy. These early scholars named Paraman Chumovits, Il’ia Tyzhonov and others produced religious texts and other publications using the Alutiiq Cyrillic writing system.

Among other Creole Alutiiq students, Vladimir Naumov (early 1800s-1895) was likely a student in one of these early church schools. He was half Russian and half Alutiiq, and traveled with his Russian American Company father throughout southern Alaska in his youth while his father traded among southern Alaska tribes.

With this extensive early travel, Naumov became polylingual: he knew as many as six Alaska Native languages and dialects, along with Alutiiq, Russian, English, Native sign language, and pictographs. He was employed as a translator for the Alaska Commercial Company (ACC), which boasted its own “museum” of objects in San Francisco collected during trade expeditions with tribes. It was at the ACC headquarters where Vladimir met an American medical doctor-turned anthropologist.

I try to imagine what it was like for Vladimir, a man of obvious Alaska Native heritage to have explored San

Francisco in the 1880s. What did he think of the bustling city? Had his father, a Russian officer, told him about the great cities of Russia? Did Vladimir realize the legacy he would leave to the Kodiak Alutiiq community? His contributions comprise the majority of all known research about Alutiiq sign language and Alutiiq pictography.

Little is known about the remainder of Naumoff's life except that he returned to the archipelago. His grave is recorded in the Afognak village cemetery. The arts of pictography and Alutiiq sign language known by Naumov and his contemporaries gradually faded from community awareness, as Kodiak Island experienced dramatic cultural change.

As previous articles within this Erinarpet column describe, 20th Century Federal and State policy on Native languages was usually prohibitive. This is in contrast to Russian colonizers who had allowed bilingualism. After decades of "English only" policies and racism, many families stopped speaking Alutiiq to their children.

By the 1970s when linguists first came to Kodiak, people were noticing that while some communities and individuals continued to speak Alutiiq, the majority of people were no longer speaking or passing down Alutiiq.

Many who have taken an Alutiiq class or viewed language resources are familiar with Dr. Jeff Leer from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, who created the first modern dictionary.

Leer is credited with creating the Roman-letter based modern Alutiiq writing system in the 1970s, but in fact, Leer recognizes Alutiiq linguist Derenty Tabios of Port Graham for creating a similar Roman letter writing system for the language during the same decade. Leer now refers to the modern writing system as the "Leer-Tabios Orthography" to bring attention to Tabios's contributions.

Here on Kodiak, Jeff Leer worked with numerous fluent speakers, but notable among them is the late Nina

Zeedar. Zeedar's influence in the documentary work Jeff led on Kodiak during the 1970s is undeniable. The unreleased multi-dialect Alutiiq dictionary by Leer has countless notations of "NZ" as the contributor for Kodiak Island terms, as she volunteered significant time sharing terms and narratives in the Kodiak archipelago sub-dialect. She is acknowledged as an expert speaker by Leer.

Larry Matfay, known as the last traditional chief of Kodiak was active in the language movement in the 1980s to early 1990s. He helped form the first Alutiiq dance group through the Kodiak Area Native Association's (KANA's) culture and heritage department.

The story of Matfay's life by Mike Rostad (*A Time to Dance*) shares stories from Matfay's remarkable life, from growing up in a sod house and traveling by skin *qayaq*. More important was his message of cultural and language preservation. Larry Matfay's daughter Florence Pestrikoff continues his legacy today as an active Alutiiq language teacher and consultant.

It is not possible to properly acknowledge all of the learned fluent speakers who worked to both document and revitalize Alutiiq language. I have had the benefit of learning from so many, and yet I know that there are many whose stories remain to be told. I hope that others may be inspired as well, to seek out the forgotten heroes of Kodiak's Alutiiq history.

Learn more about the Alutiiq language at:

www.alutiqlanguage.org or
www.alutiqmuseum.org

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