

# Archaeology and the Sugpiaq renaissance on Kodiak Island: Three stories from Alaska

## Archéologie et renaissance culturelle à l'île Kodiak: trois récits de l'Alaska

Gordon L. Pullar, Richard A. Knecht and Sven Haakanson, Jr.

Volume 37, Number 1, 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025255ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025255ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.

Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

### ISSN

0701-1008 (print)

1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Pullar, G. L., Knecht, R. A. & Haakanson, S. (2013). Archaeology and the Sugpiaq renaissance on Kodiak Island: Three stories from Alaska. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 37(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025255ar>

### Article abstract

The Sugpiat people have lived in the Kodiak Archipelago for at least 7,500 years, but suffered extraordinary pressure on their cultural identity beginning with violent Russian conquest in 1784 and followed by Russian and American colonisation. Recognising that drastic actions were needed to preserve Sugpiaq heritage, the Kodiak Area Native Association began a cultural revitalisation movement. The centrepiece was a Native-owned state-of-the-art museum that opened in 1995. This essay recounts the stories of three participants in the beginning of a process that has transformed the cultural landscape of Kodiak.

## Essai / Essay

---

# Archaeology and the Sugpiaq renaissance on Kodiak Island: Three stories from Alaska

---

Gordon L. Pullar\*, Richard A. Knecht\*\*, Sven Haakanson, Jr.\*\*\*

**Résumé:** Archéologie et renaissance culturelle à l'île Kodiak: trois récits de l'Alaska

La présence sugpiaq dans l'archipel Kodiak remonte à au moins 7500 ans. Les Sugpiat ont cependant subi d'intenses pressions sur leur identité et leur culture avec la violente conquête russe de 1784 suivie par la colonisation russe et américaine. Consciente qu'il fallait recourir à des moyens radicaux pour préserver le patrimoine sugpiaq de l'île Kodiak, la Kodiak Area Native Association a entrepris un mouvement de revitalisation culturelle, dont la pièce maîtresse fut l'ouverture, en 1995, d'un musée autochtone d'avant-garde. Cet essai relate l'expérience de trois participants au début d'un processus qui a transformé le paysage culturel de l'île Kodiak.

**Abstract:** Archaeology and the Sugpiaq renaissance on Kodiak Island: Three stories from Alaska

The Sugpiat people have lived in the Kodiak Archipelago for at least 7,500 years, but suffered extraordinary pressure on their cultural identity beginning with violent Russian conquest in 1784 and followed by Russian and American colonisation. Recognising that drastic actions were needed to preserve Sugpiaq heritage, the Kodiak Area Native Association began a cultural revitalisation movement. The centrepiece was a Native-owned state-of-the-art museum that opened in 1995. This essay recounts the stories of three participants in the beginning of a process that has transformed the cultural landscape of Kodiak.

---

\* Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development, College of Rural and Community Development, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2221 E. Northern Lights Blvd., Suite 200, Anchorage, Alaska 99508, USA. glpullar@alaska.edu

\*\* Department of Archaeology, School of Geosciences, University of Aberdeen, St. Mary's, Elphinstone Road, Aberdeen, AB24 3UF, Scotland, UK. r.knecht@abdn.ac.uk

\*\*\* Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, Box 353100, Seattle, WA 98195-3100, USA. svenh@u.washington.edu

## Introduction

For nearly three decades the Sugpiat<sup>1</sup>, the Indigenous people of Kodiak Island, Alaska, have been methodically and enthusiastically reclaiming their culture, history, and identity. Prior to the 1980s much cultural knowledge was lost or, more accurately, “misplaced,” following the first contact with Russian explorers in 1762 (Black 1992: 166).

The Sugpiat had suffered through years of trauma beginning with the Refuge Rock massacre perpetrated by Grigorii Shelikhov in 1784 (Black 1992: 170-172; Crowell 1997; Knecht et al. 2002: 177; Pullar 2001: 76-77). The massacre was followed by 34 years of atrocities by the Russian fur traders called *promyshlenniki*. For the Sugpiat, this period, called “the darkest period of their history,” ended in 1818 when the Russian Czar replaced the manager of the Russian-American Company (Black 1992: 165). The Russian period of 1818 to 1867 saw repeated epidemics, including a smallpox pandemic in 1837-1840 that had a devastating impact on Sugpiaq villages (Luehrmann 2008: 16, 39-47). While this period was relatively peaceful, many aspects of Sugpiaq culture seemed to disappear due to acculturation and assimilation, as new traditions were being adopted through European and Russian contacts.

The first major source of locally accessible information about the pre-contact Sugpiat past was revealed by an archaeological excavation that began in 1983 at Karluk on the west side of Kodiak Island. The Sugpiat had lived on the Kodiak archipelago for a long time. In fact, they had thrived for over 7,500 years prior to the arrival of the first Russians (Crowell et al. 2001: 106). The archaeological evidence shows that the Sugpiat lived comfortably because of a relatively mild climate and abundant food supply. When Russian fur traders came searching for new and productive hunting grounds for sea otters, everything changed. Sea otter pelts brought high prices in China and their harvest by Russian fur trading companies became a lucrative business venture. The first area of commercial sea otter hunting was the Aleutian Islands, but after a few decades the Russians were seeking new areas to exploit.

In the past, social scientists labelled the Sugpiat the “southernmost Eskimos” because of their linguistic ties to the Yupiit and Inuit to the north and, indeed, all the way to Greenland. But unlike their northern cousins’ word *Inuit* (singular: *Inuk*) for “people,” the Sugpiat use the term *Súget* (singular: *Suk*) (Crowell et al. 2001: 245). Sugpiaq self-identification has confused outsiders and, at times, even themselves. From the arrival of Russians to the U.S. takeover of Alaska in 1867, they were called Aleuts. When Russians arrived in the Aleutian Islands in about 1750 (Schlung 2003: 15), they referred to all the Indigenous peoples in the area as Aleuts, possibly because of their similarity to an Indigenous group on the Kamchatka Peninsula called Aliutors. They disregarded the traditional autonyms Unangan or Unangax, as the Indigenous people of

---

<sup>1</sup> The Sugpiat (singular: Sugpiaq) are the Indigenous people of Kodiak Island, Prince William Sound, lower Kenai Peninsula, and Alaska Peninsula.

the Aleutians called themselves. The Russians then moved east, encountered the Sugpiat, and called them “Aleuts” as well.

As the 1980s unfolded, the Kodiak Island Sugpiat were engaged in severe infighting in the American legal system over land and resources their business corporations had gained title to under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA). At that time there were no obvious visual representations of the culture on the island, and virtually no Kodiak Sugpiaq had ever seen any of the material culture items of the past, nor did they have a clue about what such items looked like. Elders pointed out that people had drifted away from their culture and needed to reconnect with it to survive into the future as a distinct and strong Indigenous group. The traditional language Sugtestun persisted among most of the elders who had grown up in the villages, but there were no surviving examples of traditional clothing, dancing, or ceremonies. The Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) then began formulating heritage programs to help reclaim cultural knowledge (Pullar 1992, 2001). The first programs involved archaeological excavations at Karluk in which village youth learned about their connection with the distant past. Archaeological projects have continued ever since with Native participation and control.

The implementation of the ANCSA on Kodiak Island was exciting at first until the reality of the roles of business corporations set in. There was initially excitement because the Native corporations were gaining legal title to ancestral lands as well as the potential to provide cash dividends to Native shareholders. Many of the shareholders, however, did not know that a business corporation primarily has to make a profit and that only profitable corporations can pay dividends. In reality, no profits were made. Shareholders also expected job opportunities with the regional corporation or its subsidiaries. Before the decade of the 1970s was completed, serious discontent had begun to develop among the Native shareholders. There had been no dividends and the few jobs that had resulted from the regional corporation’s purchases of small businesses in the Kodiak area disappeared when those businesses failed. One response from the corporation was to propose a merger of the village corporations with the regional corporation, thus causing further animosity and class action lawsuits from some shareholders. People began taking sides. Lifelong friends were pitted against each other and divisions arose within individual families. These battles culminated in 1983 when the entire board of directors of Koniag Inc. was removed and a new era began. Like the era before it, the new one had no visible cultural representations. But this was to change.

Today, Kodiak has a world-class, tribally-owned museum, the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, which serves as a focal point for the movement to reclaim Sugpiaq culture. This essay will cover the establishment of the museum from the perspectives of three people: the president of the local Native organisation when the movement began; an archaeologist who conducted many of the archaeological excavations and founded the museum; and the former director (2000-2013) who took the museum in directions that have greatly benefited Kodiak communities and made it internationally known.

## **Gordon L. Pullar**

In late September of 1983, in my Kodiak office of the *Kodiak Times* newspaper I received a call from a staff member at the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) asking if I could meet with the KANA board of directors. I assumed that the call was because of the infighting among the local Native people that had been playing out in the local media. The situation was difficult for all involved, as the president of KANA had recently been removed and there was deep division among the staff. Some staff members had left their positions before the president's departure to protest some of her actions, while her supporters were angry because she had been removed. Outside the organisation, a bitter struggle had recently taken place over control of Koniag Inc., the for-profit corporation formed under ANCSA to manage the land and cash received under the terms of the settlement. By now, Koniag was under the control of the new board and management, but the animosities brought about during the Koniag struggle had reached well into KANA and spread throughout the entire Kodiak Island Native community.

When I arrived at the KANA offices, a staff person led me to the KANA boardroom where a committee of the board was meeting. The committee members were cheerful and I was asked to sit down. After a pause the chairman asked if I would be willing to become the new KANA president. The board wanted to restore stability to the organisation so that funding from the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service would not be lost. Although I was surprised at this request, which I had not anticipated, I readily agreed.

I had no clue whatsoever that I was even being considered for this important position, and I did not know how I would do what they were requesting. I felt that I had the educational background for such a position if not the experience. I had a baccalaureate degree in cultural anthropology and had just received my Master's in Public Administration with a focus on tribal administration less than four months before. Nevertheless, I recognised that this might be the opportunity of a lifetime and, if I let it pass, it might never come again. Unknown to anyone but myself, the presidency of KANA had long been a personal and professional goal. Beyond that, some of the board members were elders, and I did not believe I had the right to refuse even if I had wanted to.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service were evaluating whether they needed to cancel KANA's contracts for much-needed services to the Native population. We had several meetings and, in the end, both agencies felt comfortable with KANA continuing the contracts. We now needed to address why all of this turmoil had occurred in the first place. My informal research, consisting of just engaging people I knew and respected in conversation, revealed something that at some level I already knew. There was much we did not know about our culture and history. To some elders this lack of knowledge resulted in many people not understanding their own cultural identity. As one put it, "We don't know who we are." One could

extrapolate from that statement that if people do not understand who they are then they cannot know how they should act.

In discussions with the board of directors, we reached the conclusion that KANA needed to take action to establish a wide range of cultural education programs. Everyone wanted young people to gain a better understanding of their history and culture but there did not seem to be a lot of such knowledge to share with them. Limited cultural activities had taken place in the local high school but that was the extent of the efforts.

In my second month as KANA president, I received an unexpected phone call from Richard (“Dick”) Jordan, an archaeologist and the chair of the Department of Anthropology at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. He asked if KANA would be willing to approve an archaeological excavation in the village of Karluk on Kodiak Island for the following summer of 1984. Karluk was one of the six remote villages served by KANA. He explained that he had conducted an excavation there the past summer with permission from Koniag Inc., the landowner. Now Koniag was under new control and no one had any knowledge of this project. In seeking Koniag’s permission for an excavation the upcoming summer of 1984, Jordan said he was told that Koniag considered archaeology a “non-profit” activity that fell under the purview of KANA. Consequently, Jordan was referred to me at KANA. I had never heard of Dick Jordan but found him quite friendly and charming on the phone, and genuinely excited about Karluk’s archaeological resources. In our conversation I told him of KANA’s current situation and my directive to develop programs that would help our youth learn more of their culture and history. He replied that he would be happy to have Native youth involved in his archaeology project. This seemed like an opportunity with great potential if we could come up with the funding to get the youth to Karluk from the other villages.

The summer of 1984 saw significant excavation work led by Jordan and his top graduate assistant, Rick Knecht, but without the needed financial resources we were not able to fund any youth employment for the Karluk project. However, a few Karluk youth were welcomed to the excavations by Jordan and his crew.

In the spring of 1985 a travelling version of the Smithsonian’s exhibit “Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo” came to Kodiak. William Fitzhugh of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History was responsible for the exhibit and travelled to Kodiak to check on it. Dick Jordan, as a colleague familiar with the Karluk project, had recommended that Fitzhugh stop by my office for a visit. I shared with him the less than encouraging news that virtually no Native person on Kodiak Island had ever seen any local material culture. Fitzhugh then told me something that shocked me. He said that the Smithsonian had a large collection of items from Kodiak and suggested that I visit and look at them. I did just that on a business trip to Washington in June of 1985 and my outlook on the future of our culture changed forever. Fitzhugh took me to the storage area and pulled out masks, spruce root hats, beaded headdresses, and many other objects. And he said that what I saw was just a small portion of the collection. I

asked if some of these items might be returned to Kodiak so that people could see how incredibly talented their ancestors were. He told me that the Smithsonian made loans all the time but only to certified museums with climate control and proper security. It was clear at that point that we needed such a facility.

There was a time during the mid-1970s when efforts were made to raise funds for a museum and cultural centre. A culture committee was appointed by the board of the KANA and a permit was obtained from the State of Alaska to invest in a bingo operation in Anchorage. This relatively brief effort had some financial benefits. About \$30,000 was raised and put into an interest-bearing bank account where it was largely forgotten.

We had great expectations for the summer of 1985. Jordan had submitted a major funding proposal to the National Science Foundation and seemed certain he would receive it. We continued to seek funding to get Native youth to work on the Karluk project and found that we could pay the youth from KANA's Summer Youth Employment Program funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. We contacted the village councils, seeking youth who would want to spend the summer working on the excavation, and we got mostly positive responses. I then received a call from a very discouraged-sounding Dick Jordan telling me that his NSF proposal had been denied. There would be no project in the summer of 1985. I was stunned, as I believed his funding was forthcoming. Further, we had committed to having several youth work on the project.

KANA's Summer Youth Employment Program was intended to provide local Native youth with summer jobs in which they could learn the responsibilities that having a job entailed. What if we contracted with Dick Jordan to supervise the young people and teach them job responsibilities as well as archaeology? Dick thought this was a fine idea. We then received permission to spend \$10,000 of the budget on this project and use the money to pay for archaeology expenses. I called Dick and told him what we had to offer. Ten thousand dollars! I had no idea that this was nowhere near what was needed for such a project in a remote location on an island in Alaska. I detected the slightest hesitation on the other end of the line but then Dick said, "Let's do it! We can tell our students they will need to pay their own airfares to Alaska and we can get 'in-kind' donations for the rest."

The biggest expense was the travel between Kodiak and Karluk for the crew and a lot of equipment. Dick came to Kodiak and we went to see the owner of the primary local air charter service. The owner was not in a friendly mood. It appeared that he had no use for Native people (even though they accounted for much of his income). "You know what really pisses me off?" he asked. "You guys are charging my clients a land use fee to fish in the Karluk River." Like many non-Native people in the Kodiak community, he was confusing KANA with Koniag, the landowner that had recently implemented the fee. Dick was unfazed and in a friendly way continued to tell the man the scientific relevance of the Karluk site. After a while, to my surprise, the charter owner began to be interested. He said he would think it over and gave Dick a time to

call him back. When Dick called back, he received good news. The air charters for all the crew and equipment would be donated. The Karluk project would take place after all.

The Kodiak Island Housing Authority had some vacant houses in Karluk and agreed to provide the archaeologists with lodging. The villagers themselves offered food, especially red salmon, considered the prime fish of the area. With some small glitches along the way, the archaeology project was conducted in the summer of 1985 and had dramatic results. Due to excellent wood preservation at the site, many wooden artifacts were recovered, including masks, bentwood bowls, and other utensils. A complete finely woven spruce root basket was also found. Community presentations were given in Karluk and the village of Larsen Bay as well as in Kodiak. The response was immediate and dramatic. Kodiak Native people had a rich heritage of producing needed items as well as incredible art pieces, and they began to feel a newfound pride.

KANA then received a small grant to help re-introduce traditional dancing to the area. Some people were very interested, and a practice schedule was established. Larry Matfay, a highly respected elder from Akhiok, was brought in to teach the dances. Because KANA had no meeting room that was suitable for dance, we moved the furniture in my office up against the wall to make room. We were able to bring in some Yup'ik dancers to help because of the cultural similarities.

I was contacted by Nick Pestrikoff of Ouzinkie, who was living in Anchorage at the time, about an opportunity KANA might have to join a partnership that was being put together to begin a bingo operation in Anchorage. As the state bingo permits allow only a small number of days for each permit holder to have bingo, it was necessary to have multiple permits for a fulltime operation. In this case, four permits were needed and they already had three commitments. The cost of admission was \$25,000. KANA did not have any money for such a venture, as it was all tied up in service delivery. I then thought of the \$30,000 fund established in the 1970s and presented the idea to the board of having a bingo joint venture and using money from that fund to pay our \$25,000. That was approved and we were in the bingo business again. The operation soon became profitable and the KANA board earmarked all the bingo proceeds for cultural programs, especially a museum and cultural centre.

A new bridge was built linking Kodiak with Near Island in 1985 and a new opportunity emerged. Kodiak Island Borough Mayor Jerome Selby called me to suggest that KANA pursue an agreement with the city of Kodiak to secure a piece of land on Near Island for a museum. All we needed to do was to convince the Kodiak City Council that it was a good idea and one that would benefit the entire community, Native and non-Native people alike. Simultaneously, KANA needed to convince the Kodiak public that it was a good idea, and the place to begin was by getting endorsements from all of the many civic organisations in Kodiak.

I set about getting appointments to speak with the civic organisations to state our case. I went to several of these meetings with some mixed success. There were

lingering anti-Native sentiments in Kodiak. The executive director of one non-profit organisation angrily asked me, “What do we need another museum for anyway? We already have a perfectly good museum.” He was speaking of the Baranof Museum, which is a wonderful facility in the oldest standing structure from the Russian-American period, but it focuses on Russian history, not Native. During this same exchange, he accused KANA of “empire building” in Kodiak.

I then realised that I really needed help with this effort. My position as president and CEO of KANA required a lot of time, and this was going to be a big project. I assigned a staff person to take over these efforts but it quickly became clear that he was not the right person for the job. In a conversation with Dick Jordan, he recommended Rick Knecht. Rick would be able to talk to all these organisations and give presentations on local archaeology, a topic that everyone seemed to love. I did not know Rick well at all, but Dick was very persuasive and Knecht became the first KANA Culture and Heritage Program Coordinator. Rick thrived on giving archaeology presentations and, best of all, Native and non-Native people alike were immediately attracted to his charm, his personality, and his interesting presentations.

While things were going well in securing support for the Near Island site, a new obstacle came up. The Kodiak city manager came out publicly against the idea. Fortunately, he was soon out of his position, and the Kodiak City Council was now free to approve a long-term lease for the highest point on Near Island. The lease was valued at \$1.6 million, and I felt that we were on track for a state-of-the-art museum and cultural centre.

### **Richard A. Knecht**

I am your garden-variety bearded white-guy archaeologist—I think you know the type. In May of 1983, the smallest plane I had ever travelled in arrived at the gravel airstrip outside Karluk village. It was a windy day and Mayor Larry Sugak leaned into it, as he came out to meet me and my fellow archaeologists. Before I could shake his hand, I had to stroll over to the trash barrel and toss in my barf bag. Larry and the pilot exchanged looks and suppressed smiles. It was my second day in Alaska; I had everything to learn and was as ignorant of my surroundings as a toddler. In some ways that is still true, but years of research and careful listening to elders has made me more aware of my ignorance, and that awareness is one of the great gifts that comes with working with Indigenous communities.

In the beginning, our ignorance was profound even by Western standards; the literature on Kodiak archaeology in the early 1980s was thin. You could count the major titles on one hand, beginning with Hrdlicka’s 1944 *Anthropology of Kodiak Island*, which focused on the wholesale plundering of archaeological sites for their human remains. Bad memories about archaeology still lingered in the Native community and there was a whiff of suspicion in the air. More recent archaeologists had done nothing untoward, but most excavations had taken place in areas distant from

modern villages. Donald Clark had recently published his dissertation (1974) on Kodiak archaeology, but like the other few sources it was a rare book and the copy we had with us was new to most people we met. It was among the very few archaeological studies about Kodiak, and the basic prehistoric sequence proved to be a reliable roadmap. There had never been a traditional ethnography about Kodiak; by the time anthropologists reached Alaska, Kodiak had seemed relatively acculturated, and traditional material culture was already becoming a rare commodity.

Translations of Russian-era ethno-historical accounts were not yet widely available. Kodiak elders and tradition bearers held an impressive amount of traditional knowledge, but in the early 1980s this reservoir remained largely untapped. Furthermore, that knowledge tended to focus on the natural world and the ancient but still relevant problems of subsistence life-ways and living on the land. Traditional material culture was nearly invisible in Kodiak villages. Very few admitted to knowledge of traditional belief systems and worldviews, and almost no one spoke of them.

Our team from Bryn Mawr College was led by Dick Jordan, a hard-driving chain-smoking archaeologist who had worked at the Eastern Arctic sites in Canada and Greenland. He liked to say that he wanted to know “what happened when Eskimos had all the food and wood they wanted,” and the famously salmon-rich waters of the Karluk River seemed like the perfect place for such fieldwork. The Arctic volume of the Smithsonian’s *Handbook of North American Indians* (Damas 1984) contained the latest scholarly summaries about the “Pacific Eskimo” on Kodiak and the surrounding coasts of the Alaska mainland. The first thing we learned on Kodiak was that no Pacific Eskimos existed. In 1983 most of the Indigenous people on Kodiak in fact still called themselves Aleuts; some even preferred to call themselves “Russians.” Some Native people knew that the Native language on Kodiak was not mutually intelligible with that spoken on the Aleutians. Other Sugtestun speakers marveled that Yup’ik speakers could understand them. But when we brightly assured Kodiak Native people that they were indeed Pacific Eskimos, they looked at us like we had just sprouted salmon tails from our foreheads. Some were confused, others insulted. “Pacific Eskimo” was an utterly foreign identifier, manufactured by academics and for academics. We followed the lead of the community and stopped using the term, and other archaeologists followed. Without anyone realising it, the direction of the tide had shifted. The cultural storyline now started at Kodiak and radiated to the outside world rather than the reverse.

The scholarly narrative and the community narrative were far apart in 1983, on a scale that is hard to imagine today. We came away from those first conversations with both archaeologists and Native Alaskans privately shocked by how remarkably little anyone actually knew about the cultural heritage of Kodiak Island, which seemed to exist as fragments of a narrative that had not yet been connected. Archaeologists and Native people gradually came to understand that neither possessed anything close to a monopoly on the facts. The sense of mutual respect between researcher and community on Kodiak arose from that realisation.

The Karluk One site was a “wet site” where waterlogged soils had preserved marvellous things by the thousands: complete baskets, bentwood bowls, hafted ulus, weapons, kayak parts, toys, masks, and dolls. It was a complete revelation. Seasoned archaeologists and Native villagers alike were spellbound at the complexity and elegance of these objects. The thrill of discovery was enormous and our gleefully shared sense of wonder transcended the differences between us. That sense of wonder has continued to infuse and energise the ongoing Sugpiaq cultural renaissance to the present day.

At summer’s end we held a “workshop” for the village and then again for the city of Kodiak where we gave talks and displayed several hundred of the most spectacular pieces. Hundreds of people attended these events, which were always standing room only. During the question and answer session the inevitable was asked: “what happens to the artifacts now?” The faces would fall as we explained that, lacking a local repository, the collections would go to the museum at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, about 800 miles north. For most of the community, we may well have been sending their cultural heritage to the dark side of the moon.

Many of these people had never seen or held a tangible link to their own heritage, other than the occasional broken ulu blade or stone lamp found on the beach. With the artifacts leaving the island possibly forever, these moments of discovery and pride were bittersweet. It felt like a reunion with a long-lost family member, now suddenly cut short. The idea of a local museum dedicated to Native culture had been floated before, but it now returned with a renewed and heartfelt sense of urgency. Elderly tradition bearers warned the community to seize the opportunity while they were still alive to contribute and help steer the process.

Gordon Pullar, along with a few elders, was among the first to realise what renewed research into Native heritage could mean for Sugpiaq communities. Gordon understood what we as archaeologists wanted out of Kodiak and what Kodiak wanted out of us. He refereed the scholar/community relationship in such a way that it felt natural and seamless to everyone. Thanks to this new partnership with KANA, we were in the field again in Karluk for our second field season. Dick Jordan began work at the Karluk One site with the Bryn Mawr students, and I was placed in charge of the local crew, known as the “Karluk kids” on the historic Russian-era site. They performed brilliantly, and the abundant glass trade beads, musket balls, coins, and iron axe heads were more than enough to hold the interest of the young excavators. The Karluk kids brought their parents and elders along to the site, and their genuine enthusiasm won over the whole village. In turn, Karluk won over people from other villages, who were invited *en masse* to attend the annual end-of-season potlatch and artifact display.

By the summer of 1984, archaeology had become the talk of the island. Again, without anyone being fully aware, the direction of archaeology on Kodiak was changed forever by genuine community ownership. Decades before “Indigenous Archaeology” had a name, the power sharing on Kodiak between Native people and academia was real and uncontrived.

In the mid-1980s the Sugpiat incorporated archaeology into a conscious effort to weld a new sense of cultural identity and Sugpiaq nationhood. Many non-Native people on Kodiak, like teachers and professionals, were enthusiastic about what was happening, but the established, long-time non-Native townspeople became suspicious. ANCSA had forever changed the balance of economic and political power between Native and non-Native Alaska. Some were nostalgic for a more colonialist relationship, which had been celebrated in proxy on Kodiak in the form of a curious affection for the Russian-American era. The local museum was in a historic Russian-era structure mostly dedicated to post-contact history.

An annual outdoor play romanticising Russian America called “Cry of the Wild Ram” was for 26 years the social and cultural highlight of the Kodiak summer season. It featured a large cast of actors drawn from the local community and, combined with the homemade costumes, was a colourful pageant. As Sugpiaq culture became better understood and appreciated, the play gradually became a collective embarrassment. In 1991, we excavated at the Awa’uq Refuge Rock site, where the Russian fur hunters had massacred many hundred Alutiiq villagers (Knecht et al. 2002). The story was compelling and tragic, and popular narrative about the Russian era underwent a seismic shift. Despite some attempts at updating, the play was quietly discontinued the following year. There were no protests or demands on the part of the Native community on the issue; rather, it was the result of a community consensus.

Archaeology, and the knowledge it brought with it, helped change the very fabric of the Kodiak community. As time went by, a deepening sense of respect for Native culture took hold on the part of Native and non-Native people alike, and timeworn ethnic boundaries and conventions became unneeded baggage. Many of the more profound successes of the culture revival movement on Kodiak consisted of these kinds of quiet but powerful changes of attitude toward self, toward others, and toward sense of place.

In 1987, I began work at KANA. Gordon had formed a Culture Heritage Committee from a group of Sugpiaq elders and community leaders, and for the past year had been visiting museums and culture centres throughout the country to gain insight into how these institutions functioned. KANA received a small legislative grant called Adaq’wy, which in Alutiiq translated as ‘now is the time,’ and KANA began to record oral histories and genealogies. As time went on, we established other grant-funded outreach and preservation programs, and in 1991 opened the Alutiiq Culture Center in a small storefront provided by the Afognak Native Corporation. Although we had practically no resources, there was very strong commitment, shared vision, an institutional structure, and archaeological collections. All we needed now was a proper museum building. All things considered, that was the easy bit.

In the spring of 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil spill shocked the Sugpiaq community, and traditional life-ways seemed threatened as never before. A consensus emerged that a good way to address damages to traditional culture would be the long-planned Native museum on Kodiak Island. Despite opposition from federal agencies that were

competing for these funds, the proposed Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository was awarded \$1.5 million from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council. These funds were to be used for construction, and we promised then to raise our own operating money. Since that beginning, the Alutiiq Museum has been primarily operated through funding from the Native ANCSA village and regional corporations of Kodiak Island.

In May of 1995, the Alutiiq Museum opened its doors to the drumbeats and song of the Alutiiq Dancers. Inside the exhibit cases were the artifacts from the Karluk excavations that had started it all. What the Alutiiq Museum became and what it achieved exceeded our fondest dreams that day. But that is Sven's story.

### **Sven Haakanson, Jr.**

When I was first asked in 1988 by Rick Knecht and Gordon Pullar to attend the 6th Inuit Studies Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, I did not know that I would have the privilege to be part of a larger vision that has changed and continues to change the history and future of the Sugpiat people on Kodiak. This trip, supported through KANA's newly established Alutiiq Culture Program, changed the course of my life. I had originally planned to work as a teacher in the winter and a fisherman during the summer, and was well into my studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. At the conference, I attended a lecture by Dr. Lydia Black on the Aleut people. Afterwards, I approached her to talk about her presentation on our Aleut history. We spent over an hour talking, and at the end she invited me to come to her office when I returned to the university. I thought about her presentation and wondered why I was on the far side of the world learning about my own ancestors when I should be doing this at home. Dr. Black, Dr. Knecht, and Dr. Pullar opened my eyes to another world that was invisible to us because our history was forgotten and now controlled by others. I decided then to learn more about anthropology.

In 1990, I was invited to participate in an archaeological excavation (when I was not salmon fishing) at Three Saints Bay directed by Dr. Aron Crowell (Crowell 1997). This was where Grigorii Shelikhov had established the first official Russian settlement in North America in 1784. That following year, I gave up fishing and started a new career in archaeology working with Dr. Knecht in conducting surveys and excavations. In 1992, I began working on my Ph.D. in anthropology at Harvard University. My research however took me in another direction, this time to study and live with Nenet reindeer herders on the Yamal Peninsula in northwestern Siberia, Russia. Meanwhile, in Kodiak the Alutiiq Museum was founded in 1995. As I neared the end of my work at Harvard during the summer of 1999, I was approached by Gordon Pullar, Ruth Dawson, and Amy Steffian who encouraged me to apply for the Executive Director position then open at the Alutiiq Museum. I was in the final writing stage of my dissertation and could reach this goal; my contract stipulated that the job was mine only if I finished successfully, which I did. On my first day as Executive Director, I learned that the museum had only enough funds to keep the doors open for about one month.

On that same day also, I received a call informing me that the museum would be receiving the IMLS National Award for Museum Service to be presented by the President of the United States and the First Lady. What a way to start!

The museum was facing major challenges in establishing and funding the kind of programs that would meet the needs of our communities. It had until then focused on archaeology, research, and curation but what about the rest? We needed more consultation with the villages on Kodiak to determine what they wanted and needed from their museum. This would allow us to concentrate our efforts on what mattered most. One of our first efforts was titled “Traveling Traditions” and focused on traditional arts and crafts. Once again we were frustrated by the limits on what was available to us; so much of our history seemed to be lost or forgotten. During the first generations following contact, our people adapted to both Russian and American cultures to order to survive—which meant letting go of many traditions in the process. This impacted so many facets of our once-rich culture: the language, clothing, transportation, music, and crafts and arts that had enriched and informed us were gone. What had happened to our heritage and our birthright?

While in Russia in 1991 and again in 1994-1995, I visited the Kunstkamera (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography) in St. Petersburg, where I was stunned by the displays of amazing masks, clothing, tools, drums, bows and arrows, and toys from our region. Yet very few images of these pieces existed in the academic literature, let alone in any popular format. How could we access these splendid collections and information? At that time, the Alutiiq Museum was collaborating with the Smithsonian Institution on an exhibit and catalogue titled *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People* (Crowell et al. 2001). This opened in 2001, and for the first time our community witnessed first-hand some of the quality and quantity of the ethnographic material from our own area. Later that year, I was at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, which had invited us to collaborate on an exhibit of Sugpiat/Alutiit masks collected by Alphonse Pinart in 1872-1873. This opened the door to our work with European collections.

In 2002, we began a fruitful collaboration with the Château-Musée in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, which included bringing 10 Alutiiq artists to see the collections and learn from them in 2006. We continued this joint effort with two international exhibits and two catalogues—one based on our 2006 visit and the other covering the entire collection of masks from Kodiak. We approached this project as a way to gather information about how masks were made so we could in turn teach traditional mask making to our wider community. We have successfully reintroduced the ancient art of mask making and reincorporated it into the dancing tradition across our region. This effort inspired Koniag Inc. to sponsor a five-year loan of two masks from the Château-Musée to our museum in 2012.

We also began collaborations with the Kunstkamera and the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg in 2006, and built long-term relationships with them in order to gain access to their collections for photographic images that we could share

with our community. In 2008, we negotiated a contract to work together to produce a full catalogue on all the Sugpiat/Alutiiq materials in these Russian collections. The catalogue has been published in Russian (2011) and English (Berezkin 2012).

Here at home we continue to work with our elders and others to produce high-quality publications on the Alutiiq language, archaeological research, and more. Our goal is to provide our community with the broadest possible spectrum of information so that they and future generations can access our history and language. We have changed the role of history in our lives and no longer mourn a missing past. Because of what we have recovered through oral histories, archaeological research, ethnographic and historical accounts, and international museum collections, our rich and vibrant culture has re-emerged after more than 200 years of suppression. While we have a long way to go, we have made large strides within just one decade and have changed the perceptions of who we are as a people, both inside and outside our community.

When the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository first opened its doors in May of 1995, most of its collection encompassed archaeological materials. Since then, we have increased our ethnographic, photographic, historical, and linguistic collections substantially. Over the past decade we have continued with our archaeological research while receiving numerous donations of historical and ethnographic objects. We have also collaborated and held international exhibits, both locally and overseas, and published several catalogues on European collections in order to bring the information home.

Our programs have one central goal: to bring back our history and our knowledge so that we can understand, learn, and know it within our community. The Alutiiq Museum has done all this and raised a new sense of self and dignity within our community, while continuing to uncover fresh questions and perspectives. Our programs currently focus on:

- Community archaeology - examining one region in Kodiak in detail
- Language preservation - documenting and teaching our language
- Traveling traditions - teaching about material culture and use
- Exhibits - from ethnographic, photographic, and artist collections
- International and national exchanges and publications

The Alutiiq Museum preserves the cultural traditions of the Alutiiq people and promotes greater public awareness of the rich cultural legacy of all the Indigenous societies on the Gulf of Alaska coast. In pursuit of these goals, the museum collects and preserves archaeological, ethnological, and archival materials from the Alutiiq Nation in a repository that is accessible to the public. The museum supports research on Alutiiq culture and history and shares the results through exhibits, publications, and presentations.

Our mission seems simple enough, but continual effort to inspire, motivate, and sustain such programs takes time and money. We succeed through government and

foundation grants, private donations, corporate support and, most importantly, our community. For the past decade, we have worked closely with our grantors and corporate sponsors to maintain our ongoing programs.

We have changed the Native community's perception of its own history. Even the non-academics in our community are questioning Western colonialist tradition, which despite some recent progress still tends to view Native people as scientific specimens. For the past two centuries we had no say in how we were perceived or written about. We were not even encouraged to engage in this discourse at anything approaching an equal level. This has changed forever in our corner of Alaska, and ever more Native people are taking up roles as scientists, be they anthropologists, linguists, biologists, or other specialists. Today the Alutiiq Museum is an irreplaceable and essential part of Kodiak's cultural landscape. It is also internationally known as an institution that was planned, built, owned, and managed by the Kodiak Island Sugpiat, as it will always be.

## **Conclusion**

We must humbly emphasise the fact that ours are but three stories among many. Listing just the names, much less the contributions, of the individuals that were essential to the long history we have outlined here would easily take up as much space as this entire essay. Suffice it to say that the success of the Alutiiq Museum and the cultural revival it brought about required labour, love, and commitment from a great many skilled and dedicated people on Kodiak Island and beyond. As a community, we learned a number of useful lessons in establishing the Alutiiq Museum and its programs. The lessons seem simple enough, but they took a great deal of time and money to learn, and we summarise them here for the benefit of those who may be on a similar journey.

1) For a community-based collaboration to work, it must extend beyond information exchange and involve true power sharing on all levels of the project.

2) The best collaborations are long term. Locally-based technical skills and infrastructure capacities thus have a chance to evolve and become embedded and, finally, centred in the community.

3) Multiple goals and worldviews strengthen collaboration. Mutual respect for diverse goals in archaeological research was crucial to success in the Kodiak experience. Nobody accused the archaeologists of being colonialists because they benefited from publishing the information in academic reports and journals. Similarly, the archaeologists were happy to see the renewed interest and facts from the past used to underpin the educational, political, and economic goals of the Native community. Everybody was allowed to win.

4) Collaboration can bring positive and lasting change to local and academic communities alike.

## References

BEREZKIN, Yuri E. (ed.)

2012 *The Alutiit/Sugpiat - A Catalog of the Collections of the Kunstkamera*, translated by Lois Fields and Katherine Arndt, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.

BLACK, Lydia T.

1992 The Russian Conquest of Kodiak, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, 24(1-2): 165-182.

CROWELL, Aron

1997 *Archaeology and the Capitalist World System: A Study from Russian America*, New York and London, Springer.

CROWELL, Aron, Amy STEFFIAN and Gordon L. PULLAR (eds)

2001 *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.

DAMAS, David Damas (ed.)

1984 *Handbook of North American Indians, volume 5, Arctic*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution.

KNECHT, Rick, Sven HAAKANSON and Shawn DICKSON.

2002 Awa'uq; Discovery and Excavation of an 18th Century Alutiiq Refuge Rock in the Kodiak Archipelago, in B. Frohlich, A.B. Harper and R. Gilberg (eds), *To the Aleutians and Beyond: The Anthropology of William S. Laughlin*, National Museum of Denmark.

LUEHRMANN, Sonja

2008 *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.

PULLAR, Gordon L.

1992 Ethnic Identity, Cultural Pride, and Generations of Baggage: A Personal Experience, *Arctic Anthropology*, 29(2): 182-191.

2001 Contemporary Alutiiq Identity, in A. Crowell, A. Steffian and G.L. Pullar (eds), *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.

SCHLUNG, Tyler

2003 *Umnak: The People Remember*, Unalaska, Museum of the Aleutians.