



# GAMING TRADITIONS

Games have been part of Alutiiq culture for centuries. Archaeologists studying old village sites find darts, dice, throwing discs, and tally sticks illustrating that the traditional games enjoyed today have ancient origins. Games had many purposes. They taught skills, reinforced spiritual beliefs, and provided entertainment. Men’s games honed hunting skills, while children’s games taught adult activities.

Alutiiq games varied with the seasons. In the fall, children played *aigat* (hands / fingers), a string game meant to slow the sun from setting and give families more time to prepare for winter. Then, as the migratory birds headed south, Alutiiqs put their toys and games away for winter – so as not to prolong bad weather. As spring approached, children played a sunrise game, a string game that hastened warm weather. When the geese and sparrows returned to the land, toys, games, and competitions reappeared to celebrate the birth of the year. Elders remember spring as a time when beaches filled with people playing games and preparing for subsistence activities.

## CHILDREN’S PLAY

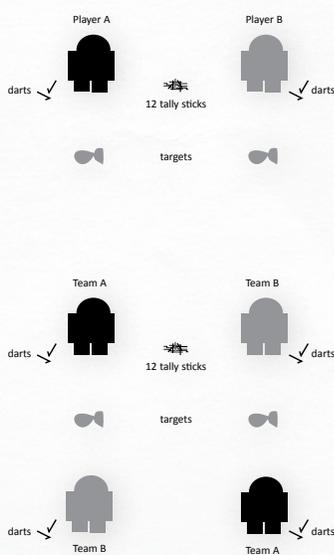
Young people imitated adults with toys. Miniature oil lamps, bowls, scoops, ulus, and skin stretching boards helped girls learn household tasks, while boys practiced boating, fishing, hunting, and ceremonial activities with toy kayaks, bows, harpoons, fish hooks, and drums.

## MEN’S GAMES

Men competed in some of the liveliest gaming, assembling privately to play spiritually powerful target games. In prehistoric times, they played in the *qasgiq* - a community men’s house. More recently, this type of gaming took place in an old sod house or someone’s home. These raucous events featured singing and gambling that might last all night. Elders recall that people bet quantities of food, clothing and even firearms, boats, and houses on the outcome of matches.

## COMMUNITY GAMES

Community gatherings were an opportunity for outdoors games. Both men and women enjoyed participating in athletic challenges that included swimming, boating, and running races as well as tests of strength, wrestling, high jumping, target throwing, and a variety of team sports. Popular



## RULES FOR AUGCA’AQ AS REPORTED BY LARRY MATFAY

**OBJECT:** To score 12 points by hitting a suspended target with darts

**EQUIPMENT:** 2 darts and 1 target for each player. Twelve tally sticks. The target, or *mangaq* (dolphin), is carved in the shape of a sea mammal. Hang the targets about an inch from the floor and 10 to 12 feet apart.

**PLAYERS:** Two individual players, or four players in teams of two.

### RULES:

- Players in a kneeling position take turns throwing their darts, until all the darts are thrown. If two play, each player has 2 darts. If four play, then one player from

each team has 2 darts and team members play alternate games.

- The game begins with 12 tally sticks piled between the players. Players take their points from this pile. When the pile is depleted, they take points from each other.
- 12 points wins a game, 2 games wins a match.
- The game is also won if a player’s second dart sticks into his first dart.

**SCORING:** Each target is divided into sections worth 1, 2, 3, or 5 points. Players score points by hitting the corresponding part of the target. To score, the dart must not fall out of the target. If a player’s dart hits the line between target sections – he scores nothing. If a player hits the line on which the target is suspended, he scores 8 points.

games included *yaamaq* (rock) – a rock throwing game like horseshoes, and shooting contests. Men and boys aimed arrows at pieces of kelp in the game *ruuwaq* (arrow). Both games are still played today.

### GAMES TODAY

Game playing remains part of the seasonal rhythm of Alutiiq communities. Buoy races, tug of war challenges, pie eating contests, egg tosses, and boxing matches are popular activities at summer gatherings, and new forms of gambling - card games, Bingo, and pull tabs, are widely enjoyed throughout the year. Yet, many people remember the old games. Old Harbor men still compete at *augca'aq* – a traditional dart game - during the six weeks of Russian Orthodox Lent, when both hunting and other forms of gambling are prohibited. Youth continue to carve toy boats and organize Alutiiq ball games, and each spring teens tests their skills at the Native Youth Olympics.

## THE STICK GAME - KAATAQ

*Kaataq* is a favorite Alutiiq men's game, involving lots of singing, joking and careful sleights of hand. Native sea otter hunters working in California learned this game and brought it back to Alaska. In the past, men played *kaataq* in the weeks before Lent, staying up all night to bet on matches. Old sod houses were an excellent place to play, as they were warm and private. Men never played *kaataq* around children. It was considered shamanic.

This simple guessing game requires two inch-long pieces of wood or bone. Although the sticks are the same size, one is marked and the other is plain. The marked stick, called the 'wee,' might be painted, burned on the ends, or grooved. The unmarked stick is the 'dip.'

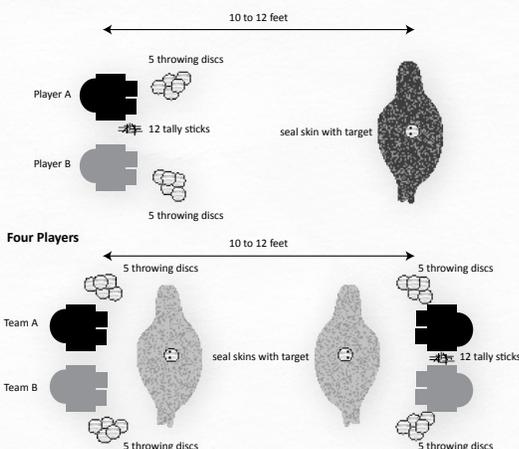


*Akhiok ladies play Kaataq. Photo by Mike Rostad, Alutiiq Museum archives.*

In *kaataq*, two players stand facing each other. One holds the sticks behind his back, while taunting his opponent. The holder, arranges the sticks in his fists, then brings one hand to his chest and leaves the other against his back. When he says pick, the challenger must guess which stick is in the fist on the holder's chest the 'wee' or the 'dip.' If the challenger guesses correctly, he scores a point. If the challenger guesses incorrectly, the holder receives a point. The holder can change the game by putting both sticks in the hand behind his back. When the challenger guesses on an empty hand – the holder wins a point. However, if an observer catches the holder's sleight of hand, the observer shouts change, and the holder must put the hand with both sticks on his chest for the challenger to select. In this case, the challenger wins a point. The first player to accumulate 16 points wins.

### RULES FOR *KAKANGAQ*, AS REPORTED BY LARRY MATFAY

Two Players



**OBJECT:** To score 12 points by covering a target with thrown gaming discs

**EQUIPMENT:** 5 throwing discs for each player (1½ to 4 inches in diameter each), one target disc (1 to 1½ inches in diameter), and a sealskin or grass mat.

**PLAYER:** Two individual players, or four players in teams of two

**RULES:**

- Players take turns throwing discs one at a time until all the discs are thrown.
- Players may knock each other's discs off the target with their throws.

- After all the discs have been thrown, the score is calculated.
- The game begins with 12 tally sticks piled between the players. Players take their points from this pile. When the pile is depleted, they take points from each other.
- 12 points wins a game, 2 games wins a match.

**SCORING:** If a player's disc covers part of the target, score 2 points. If two discs land on top of the target, the top disc scores. If none of the discs cover the target, but the closest disc is within an index finger length away – the owner of that disc scores 1 point. If two discs are within a finger's length of the target, the closest wins the point.

### LEARN MORE:

Aurcaq: Interruption, Distraction, and Reversal in an Alutiiq Men's Dart Game, 1987 by Craig Mishler. American Journal of Folklore 110(436):189-202.