**TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP**

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Long ago, before Westerners arrived in Alaska, the communities in the Bering Straits Region had leaders who Inupiat titled “umaliit,” Yupiit titled “uss’tali” and St. Lawrence Island leaders titled “umiileq.” Umaliq (plural umaliit) could mean boat owner, leader or rich man and/or all three (the last definition will be used in this article). Westerners often called this person a “chief.” This important leadership position was not inherited but based on earned respect and demonstrated capabilities. Some, but not all umaliit were also *anatkut* (shamans or singular anatkuq). Elders from Shishmaref to Stebbins told of the same qualities traditional leaders had during the Kawerak Elders Conferences in the 1980s.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Umaliit were responsible for upholding laws, decisions on village moves or relocations, where to hunt, when to have potlatches or ceremonies, and handled those who broke community laws. They conferred with Elders when there were disputes or conflicts in the community or threats from outside groups. Leaders were often excellent hunters. They showed people in their respective villages to take the right action in different situations. An umaliq was well respected and generally was wise and courageous.

When there were problems or conflicts in the village, people went to him. Issues might include someone stealing, causing disruption in the village, or more serious crimes like murder or rape. Punishment for serious crimes could include banishment from the village or even death. Generally, they would talk over issues at a gathering where people had an opportunity to give their opinions. When there was general consensus the umaliq declared what was to be done, keeping the well-being, survival and prosperity of his village in mind. As with any society, some leaders were self-serving but they would eventually be replaced. If the leader continually made poor decisions, the people followed someone who did the right thing. Each village had its own laws. Family problems were taken care of by the mother and father who taught their children to behave, how to treat others, to respect others and their property and other cultural values. Elders guided the young ones. Children were taught that if they were belligerent or did not obey the laws they would not live long.

An umaliq always represented his people when dealing with other villages and outsiders. A good Inupiaq leader ensured widows and orphans were taken care of. He was responsible for community feasts including setting the time of year and which villages were to be invited. As a rich man, he would be expected to distribute gifts on special occasions.

Traditionally leaders met in the qargi (community or men’s house) where men discussed community issues and decisions were made. The qargi also was a place for the men to make and repair tools and train boys and young men to learn from hunters, Elders and leaders. Larger villages had more than one umaliq (boat owner and captain) but only one leader.[[2]](#footnote-2) Each village had its own customs and generally leaders were chosen based on character, proven capability and respect. There was one chief who had the final say on village matters.

These traditional governing customs were in place when Westerners first arrived. In 1936, the United States amended the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) to include Alaska Natives. This began the introduction of new Westernized systems that eventually influenced the way village leaders were chosen.

Today, our communities have multiple organizations which specialize in various functions from economic development, health care, municipal affairs, community non-profits and tribal government. Each organization has its own leadership, some hired and some elected by shareholders or tribal members. Our ancestors left us a wonderful inheritance – a culture with traditional values developed over the centuries that enabled us to survive challenges and thrive. Our ancestors chose strong qualities for umaliit of their time, particularly those reflecting character, proven capability and respect, which are still applicable and important today.

The late William Oquilluk, author of “People of Kauwerak” described four catastrophic disasters in our history as a people that we have survived. He said, “The fifth disaster is maybe now. There are not many old people left. The rules and stories of our ancestors are being forgotten.” Sitnasuak shareholders are encouraged to learn our history, practice our values today, and continue supporting and developing strong leaders who can embrace our values, make wise decisions, act courageously and promote respect.

1. Kawerak Elders Conference Tapes transcribed and translated via the Kawerak Eskimo Heritage Program. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wales was an exception. The village had a population over 700 and historically had two groups each with its own leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)