
Angela Hovak Johnston, editor. *Reawakening Our Ancestors' Lines: Revitalizing Inuit Traditional Tattooing*. Inhabit Media, 2017, 70 pp. ISBN: 978-1-77227-169-0

Our libraries and book stores are well stocked with publications about the sociology, anthropology, archaeology and history of tattooing around the world. However, the one reviewed here is quite unique. It is the result of an eight year-long personal project by Inuit artist Angela Hovak Johnston to revive the tattooing tradition of Inuit women in Nunavut, Canada. This traditional art had almost disappeared after it was banned by missionaries and residential schools, and it seemed even more threatened when the last Inuit woman to carry such body prints died in 2005. This was the trigger for this project, which led Johnson and her acolytes to work together in the *Tattoo Revitalization Project*: Marjorie Tungwenuk Tahbone, a traditional Inupiaq tattoo artist from Alaska who taught Johnston the hand poking and hand stitching tattooing techniques; Denis Nowoselski, a contemporary tattoo artist from Yellowknife; Cora De Vos, an Inuk photographer from Alberta; and elder Alice Hitkoyak Ayalik from Nunavut.

The anthropologist and archaeologist in me regrets that the author did not wish to use traditional materials to revive this ancestral art, preferring metal, cotton and ink to bone, sinew, oil and soot. However, the goal was not to replicate this art in all its details, but rather to revive an old technique and resurrect, by the same token, a form of expression almost gone. Traditionally, these tattoos were a rite of passage to puberty, indicating that a woman was ready to endure pain, give birth, and take care of her husband and children. As Catherine Niptanatiak, one of the participants in the project, points out, the tattoos also served as a spiritual protection against the forces of nature (20). For others still, they were simply made to look beautiful.

This book presents a portrait of about thirty women of all ages (from thirteen to seventy-three years old) from the village of Kugluktuk, Nunavut, who agreed to be tattooed by Tahbone and Johnston in 2016. It is their stories that are told through "the personal journeys of the modern Inuit women who inherited the right to be tattooed for strength, beauty, and existence, and to reclaim our history" (4). Some of these women also learned how to use this traditional art during the project, contributing to its revitalization and perpetuation.

A majority of the women chose to receive modest tattoos with simple, yet elegant designs, which are worn with obvious pride: "I can't explain the feeling of pride I have for my facial tattoos" (24), says Colleen Nivingalok, another participant. It is this sense of pride, in addition to the smiles and the joy in the women's eyes, that De Vos managed to capture in her magnificent photos, along with female solidarity. The women in this book all look amazingly beautiful, proud and strong. Some photos also show tears and suffering, and some testimonials are quite moving. For example, April Hakpitok Pigalak talks about an elder who once came to tell stories to a group of young children, but when asked to talk about an old tradition, she refused and remained silent, because she had always been told to no longer practice it (18).

Many participants emphasize the importance of reconnecting with their culture and ancestors, of passing on their knowledge and traditions to their children and grandchildren. This is probably the reason why so many of the designs they chose represent relatives and siblings. Some others are abstract or symbolic representations of the natural elements of the landscape where they live or from which they come. Janelle Angulalik explains that "Since I got my tattoo people say I

look like my granny and my dad” (34), while Jaime Dawn Kanagana Kudlak says that “My aunty Emily is the second person so far to get this tattoo. [...] Since I got this tattoo, I can feel our connection is much stronger” (32). For Mary Ann Kilak Niptanatiak Westwood, it was important to “continue with some of our traditions and also have what grandmothers had” (42).

Although I acknowledge that Johnston is an artist, not a writer or a scientist, I do believe that one important thing missing from this book is an historical or anthropological introduction to the Inuit traditional art of tattooing. It would have provided a useful context to understand the importance of tattooing among ancestral Inuit societies. Perhaps the author could have sought the help of an academic collaborator in this domain to write that up. Moreover, while some stories are powerful and moving, they are frequently too short, mostly taking up three or four paragraphs only. As a reader I wanted to know more about these women. What is their life history? Do they come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds? How were they chosen to participate in the project? What do other, non-tattooed, people of their community think about tattooed people? In my view, the most interesting testimonials are the few that are slightly longer (though still only one page long), such as that of Wynter Kuliktana Blais, who talks about her balanced life between the contemporary and the traditional worlds. Also, the book is almost entirely focused on the positive aspects of the project, which is legitimate, but one wonders what were the problems, obstacles, frustrations, or surprises that must have occurred while running the project, or during its preparation phase. Why did it took eight years to realize, for example? Why were such issues completely omitted? Was it for fear of possibly ending with a less positive or optimistic message?

While this book will be of special interest to most Native Peoples, I suspect that non-Native students, teachers, and academics in the social sciences and the humanities will also find pleasure and interest in reading it, as will the general public since it is simply written, jargon-free, richly illustrated, and affordable. I am also delighted to think that it will bring an unfamiliar aspect of Inuit culture to the attention of many readers. However, the latter should pay close attention to the author’s polite call for non-Inuit people not to receive or replicate tattoos with traditional Inuit designs, so that they will not interfere with this unique and important effort to reappropriate and revitalize an esteemed tradition that was almost lost.

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