Tattoo tradition reclaimed

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Marjorie Tahbone, an Inupiat tattoo artist from Nome, Alaska, left, watches as Hovak Johnston, seated, applies a tattoo in the traditional hand-poking method on the arm Catherine Niptanatiak while elder Alice Hitkoak Ayalik watches.

Hovak Johnston's long journey to bring back symbol of Inuit women's heritage

women doing

Inuit women

tattoos."

Hovak Johnston

by Michele LeTourneau Northern News Services Kugluktuk/Coppermine

Self-administered with black eyeliner, Hovak Johnston's simulation of facial tattoos was a test of sorts.

"I tried different markings on my face to get the right symbol. I thought, I'm going to walk around with these to see if I'm confident enough, because I know I'll get stares. I know I'll get questions. Am I ready for that? I walked around for a week before I knew I needed them permanently."

It would take Johnston three more years to find the right person to tattoo her permanently.

"I always wanted an Inuk woman to do it. But there was nobody practicing that traditional tattoo method anymore," she said, adding that around the same time the illness and death of the last Inuk woman with tattoos shocked her.

"I thought, this can't be. This is going to be a history we just read in the books, again, of our culture."

Her quest began in earnest. Johnston researched and spread the word far and wide. In communities, people had heard about how it was done but had never seen it done. She considered the modern tattoo-gun method.

"I'd go into tattoo parlours and walk right back out. I wanted the connection. There was just something missing there. It just didn't feel personal enough."

Her husband, a teacher, had a 17-year-old student who, as it turns out, was passionate about tattoos – the art and the application. The student had a binder filled with Inuit tattoos and Inuit stories, although he isn't Inuk.

"That's how passionate he became. His bed-

room was his tattoo parlour and it was the most sanitary place I've ever seen. He didn't even sleep there. I had a great connection with him. He did a wonderful job."

That first tattoo was by the modern gun method. She now has traditional

hand-stitched hand-poked tattoos. Hand-stitching involves a thread wet with ink stitched through the skin with a sewing needle.

"It looks like the scariest, but it's the least painful. It takes the long-

est, too. You feel the person, you **NORTHERNER** the person, you feel the stitching you feel every-

thing. You just have so much more personal connection to each other."

The hand-poking simply involves poking the ink into the skin, and it's next in terms of the least pain. Tattoos in the traditional methods heal more quickly than a tattoo carved into the skin with a gun, which is both noisy and the most painful method.

Banishing the fear and shame

Johnston's odyssey really began when she was a child, living in outpost camps in the Kitikmeot region.

"With my parents we would travel to Kugluktuk and I'd see this Inuk woman. She had tattoos on her face. I was always so attracted to that and thinking, those are so amazing."

Eleven years after first seriously thinking about getting an Inuit tattoo by tracing symbols on her face with eyeliner, Johnston organized the Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project. The six-day project took place in Kugluktuk in late April.

There, Johnston applied her first facial tattoo

with a tattoo gun and an arm tattoo, her first by the traditional stitching method, both on Millie Angulalik.

For the women, it was a life-changing experience of reclaiming their heritage.

"I wish everyone could experience this. It was a connec-"We want Inuit experience this. It was a connection to our people, a connection to our culture, a connection to our ancestors - everything. All in one. It got everybody talking, from young to old. The whole community coming together, talking. And celebrating," said Johnston.

> A community feast was held for the women once the project was completed.

"There was just so much fear, so much shame from when the missionaries came and the residential schools started ... So the elders now were the young people at that time when it was being banned and frowned upon. The elders were still feeling some of those feelings. This

to embrace it." Bringing back this tradition isn't just about women being tattooed but, also about Inuit doing the tattooing themselves.

sort of broke that, and we're being taught again

"It was so bothersome to me that we didn't have anybody because we have so many talented seamstresses, so many talented Inuit women all over Canada, all over the world. I'm a seamstress. I worked with skins, I worked with hides my whole life. I wanted to learn how to do this because that would be the start of bringing it

Between getting her first tattoo and learning how to apply them, Johnston researched the topic while raising her boys and working. Finally, she quit her job and devoted herself full time to organizing the six-day workshop in Kugluktuk.

"I needed to. It was time. It's so important. I've been putting it off for too long."

She put together many proposals for funding. "I didn't want any of the women to pay. So much was taken away from us. Why should we pay for something that's been taken away from us?"

The Canada Council for the Arts, Ekati Dominion Diamond, Kikiak, the Northern Arts and Cultural Centre, Coppermine Inn, the Hamlet of Kugluktuk, Super 8 Yellowknife and the Tahikyoak IBA Heritage Fund all made the project possible, said Johnston, who wanted a whole group of women to participate.

The project was planned for a dozen women, but 26 joined. Johnston had to turn many more away because they'd run out of materials. She also wanted to ensure the tattoo artists were looked after.

Marjorie Tahbone, an Inupiat tattoo artist from Nome, Alaska, who practises the traditional method, Denis Nowoselski from Yellowknife and Johnston tattooed the women, from 13 to 56 years of age, over six days. The days were long, 13 to 14 hours.

'They feel whole'

"When you're tattooing you're not just a tattoo artist. You become a counsellor. You're thinking of your ancestors. You're thinking of your family. You're thinking of your past. So much comes out during the process," she said, adding one full day was spent out on the land to recharge and gather themselves up before continuing with the project.

Johnston herself can now tattoo using the

Please see Markings, page 15

Markings make women 'feel whole'

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Tattoo, from page 14

traditional ways of stitching and poking, as well as the modern tattoo gun.

"I need to learn this fully and then pass it on. We want Inuit women doing Inuit women tattoos. It just makes so much sense for our people to be doing this for our people."

Johnston hopes to get to Igaluit with a similar workshop, and is open to helping out in any community which might want to organize a tattoo revitalization project. She can be found through the Facebook page Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project.

Meanwhile, she's working on a coffee-table book with an Inuk photographer who documented the workshop.

Her inspiring work is not

"It brings a woman so much first."

more than the markings: it carries family identity and spiritual protection.

"Most of the women say that they feel whole now. They feel like themselves. They feel Inuk.

"It makes me crazy that women feel they aren't Inuk enough because they don't speak their language or they don't have brown skin ... It's sad that there are things like this planted into someone's head. When you're Inuk, carry on your traditions."

And for non-Inuit who find these methods and markings intriguing, Johnston has this to say: "This was taken away from us. Let us take this back. I know non-Inuit women, even men, wanting tattoos because some of them are so appealing

... Please don't do that. Please let Inuit women take this back

Upon completion of the Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project, the women who received tattoos were celebrated by the community at a feast. In the back, from left, are Yellowknife tattoo artist Denis Nowoselski. traditional Inupiat tattoo artist Marjorie Tahbone from Nome, Alaska, Doreen Evyagotailak, Nancy Kadlun, Melissa MacDonald Hinanik, Mary Ann Westwood, Star Westwood, Theresa Adamache, April Pigalak, Mary Taletok and organizer and tattoo artist Hovak Johnston. In the front, from left, are Catherine Niptanatiak, Janelle Angulalik, Millie Angulalik of Cambridge Bay, Daisy Alonak, Tanya Ongahak, Wynter Kuliktana Blais and Cecile Lyall of Taloyoak.

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Hovak Johnston hand-stitches a tattoo for the first time on Millie Angulalik. left.

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Janelle Angulalik, at 13, left, was the youngest participant at the Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project in Kugluktuk. She is with Millie Angulalik and Hovak Johnston, right.

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