

news from **native** california



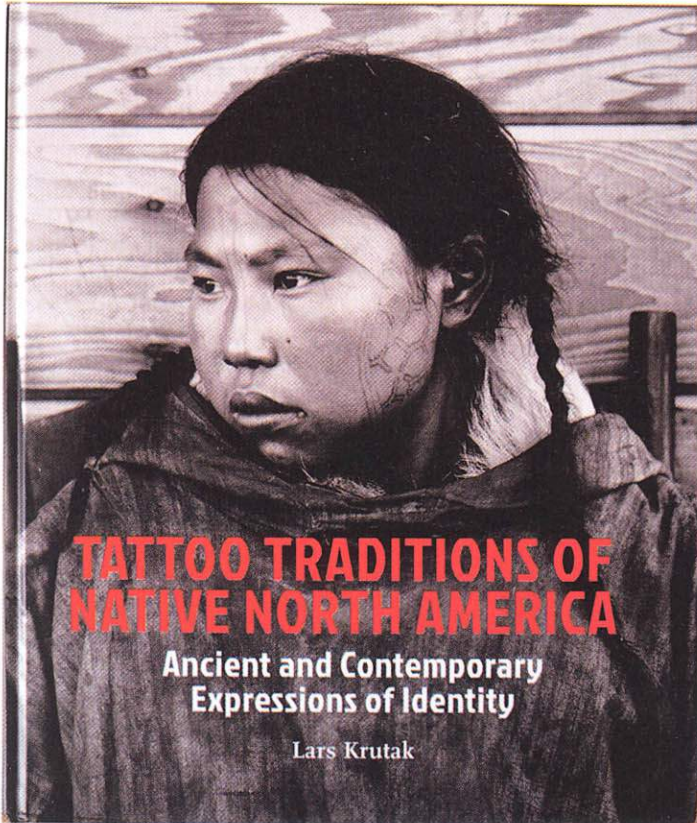
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Book Review



Tattoo Traditions of Native North America: Ancient and Contemporary Expressions of Identity

Lars Krutak

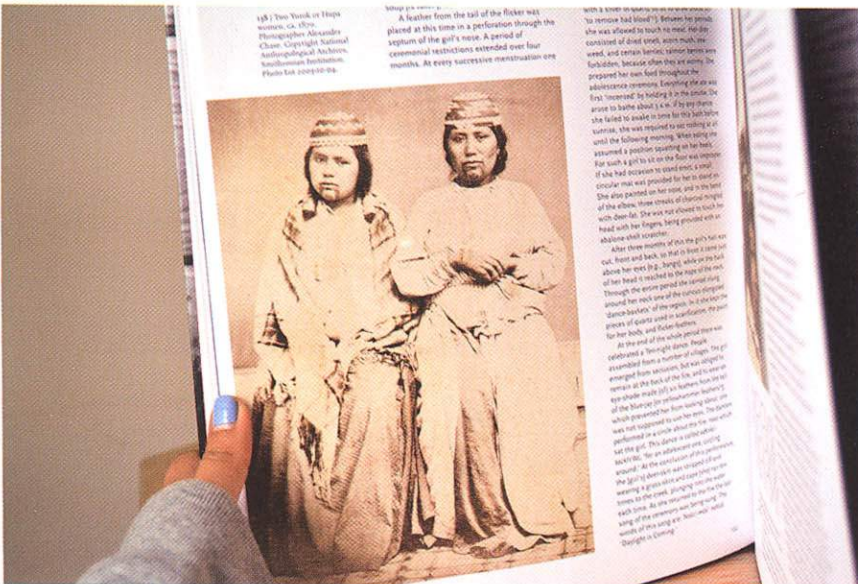
LM Publishers, 2014, 256 pp, \$70. ISBN 978-9-491-39409-6

Reviewed by Analisa Tripp

SIMPLY PUT, this book is beautiful. *Tattoo Traditions of Native North America: Ancient and Contemporary Expressions of Identity* is a large book, with nearly three hundred pages filled with photographs, drawings, descriptions, and testimony illustrating the rich and enduring traditions of tattooing present in all areas and nearly every cultural group of Native North America. These are traditions that date back thousands of years; a far cry from the popular “tramp stamps” and co-opted “tribal tattoos” of the non-Native variety. Among those featured are the tattoos of an 1800s Natsilingmiut Inuit woman whose tattooed thighs ensured that her children would be greeted by something of beauty upon their entrance into the world; a Yuki/Concow/Maidu woman who received her traditional chin tattoos in 2004 and

lost her job over it; the Cherokee couple with matching Grandmother Spider tattoos symbolizing the restoration of religious ceremonies and women’s power in their community today. These are the stories that are rarely told, about traditions that have been quieted, and by the people who are working to change that.

The author, Lars Krutak, is a non-Native American cultural anthropologist who has been travelling to indigenous communities worldwide for over fifteen years to showcase the traditions of tattooing and other forms of body modification. Given what I know about anthropologists, I am understandably hesitant when presented with books such as this. I have learned to take what anthropologists have to say with a mountain of salt and my most



also left with a piece of her Indigenous culture inked upon her face. She says, "Tattooing is part of a larger Indian Renaissance [and] when blood calls you, it's too strong to deny."¹³⁸

I interviewed L. Frank in 2012 at her home in Santa Rosa, California, with another of the "one-bounded and eleven's," Wintu herbalist, ethnobotanist, and teacher Sage LaPená, who is the daughter of noted Nontippon Wintu artist, poet, professor and writer Frank LaPená. L. Frank told me that it took many years for Native Californian women to bring back tattooing because of Indigenous and non-Indigenous suppression prior to the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) of 1978:

Even in the 1970s, our religion and traditions were being suppressed by authorities and especially our families. Because they wanted to protect us from being outcast and harassed. But as a people, there is a fundamental right that we have towards speaking our own language, the right to harvesting our Native foods, and looking the way we are supposed to. But people were afraid of letting their children do these things because they would bring

unwanted attention. It took many years for this mindset to change, but now people aren't afraid of having their children do these things anymore, although there are still racist areas [in California].

LaPená agreed, but she also explained other details concerning Indigenous peer pressure not to get tattooed:

Until the passage of AIRFA, most Native Americans were not allowed to practice their religion, so in some sense they were invisible and did not exist. What I learned from my father [Frank LaPená] was that California was once part of Mexico, so it was OK to be Mexican. But it wasn't OK to be California Indian. And then there was a period of time in the 1940s when many Other peoples [ethnics] were coming in, and we were all [agricultural] fieldworkers, and so then we would actually say we were Italian. This helped to get into places or be accepted, as opposed to being California Indian because you were lower caste and were not accepted. We were invisible, in terms of we couldn't outwardly participate in society or in our ceremonies because some of those things that had to do with ceremonial passage were considered to be mutilation [to children] and it was illegal. It had to be proven that it was part of our culture and religious practice [and that is why tattooing nearly died out].

But the biggest peer pressure was from our Tribe.¹³⁹ You have to be given permission by elders [to be tattooed] when it is the proper time, because you have to have the right knowledge to do so. For some of the tribes, only certain ranks [social statuses] or clans could get them. For me, I knew I was ready to get it [tattoo] because I was trained as a traditional herbalist by my mentor [Mabel McKay, a renowned healer].

In that day and age, we were not getting these [tattoos] at puberty. Instead, it was my mark of passage because I had attained a certain level of knowledge based on what I was trained to be. When that person [Mabel] passed, it was like I woke up and I said to myself, "I have to get this." There was an urgency that I needed to come to this next place in my life where that would happen...I don't know if it is a level, but this mark in time was like a date on the calendar, and as I turned to the next page I knew the next place I was



139 | Sage LaPená photographed in Santa Rosa, California, 2012. Photographer Lars Krutak.



140 | Lema Borestein, Corcoran City, California, 2011. Photographer Lars Krutak.

going to. It was a profound turning point for me, because you view yourself differently, others view you differently, like the elders. They grew up in the boarding school¹⁴⁰ and assimilation era. To be tattooed was to bring attention to yourself, and they were taught to blend in or they were punished.¹⁴¹

I was raised in the 1970s when there was the Native American movement, Alcatraz was taken over, and what came into being after that was our religious freedom. So being raised in this time period was so very different than what my parents' and grandparents' generation experienced when they were growing up. But the sacrifices they made during those years allowed me to get a tattoo, they ultimately paved the way.

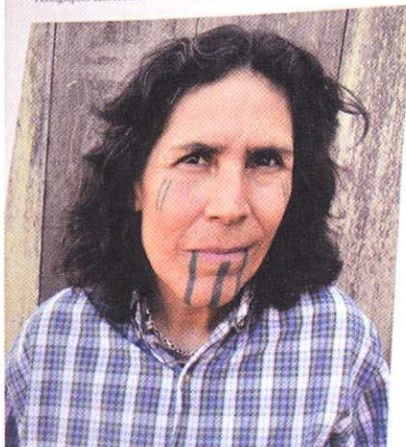
Wearing a 111 is not for everyone, especially as it comes with great responsibility. Of the tattooed men and women, I met in California, all of them are at the forefront of cultural revitalization and preservation efforts in linguistics, Traditional ecological knowledge, ethnomusicology, basketry, among other cultural pursuits.

L. Frank told me when she received her tattoos, she became "smothered with responsibilities and that came as a surprise to me.

With each tattoo, I felt a difference...I am still not, but I have to think way beyond myself. I am not sure everyone feels that way, but I know they are affected and that they didn't anticipate it."

LaPená provided other details concerning the responsibilities associated with the 111 tattoo:

When I was growing up, I learned about the boarding school era and these difficulties, and the genocide perpetuated against us. I was surrounded by my elders, other Native people and ceremony, and to me all these things were natural and a regular part of my life. And I went through the shortened version of our puberty ceremony — although back then we didn't have as much information about rituals as we do now because they have been restored. I participated in all the dances, had children and became an herbalist. [Tattoo] was one more step, a natural step my birthright to who I am as a traditional Native woman. I would say it makes me whole human being, that I might take rightful place in my community. And I having to pull out my credentials, of and what I represent, it is there on my forehead I open my mouth. And when taking care of the earth, living with



138 | L. Frank, Santa Rosa, California, 2012. Photographer Lars Krutak.

critical frame of reference. What I appreciate about this particular book, which is distinctly non-academic, engaging, and reader-friendly, is that Krutak strikes a great balance by presenting historical anthropological accounts with the idea that they are neither necessarily right nor wrong, but up for interpretation, along with his own social commentary, and most importantly, the voices of the featured people themselves.

This book makes it a point to shed light on the struggles that Native communities have had to face that led to the lapse in the continuance of such traditions: institutionalized methods for assimilation and homogenization, like the boarding school system, which caused a generational rift communities are to this day working to overcome; and the illegalization of Native languages and religions. Sage LaPená, a Wintu herbalist, ethnobotanist, and teacher, shares her thoughts on this: "I was raised in the 1970s; the American Indian Movement, Alcatraz was taken over, and what came after was our religious freedom. So being raised in that time period was so very different than what my parents' and

grandparents' generation experienced growing up in the boarding school and assimilation era. But the sacrifices they made during those years allowed me to get a tattoo, they ultimately paved the way." All over the country and beyond, indigenous communities are making strides to revitalize traditions like tattooing. As Tongva / Ajachemem artist, writer, and language advocate L. Frank said, "Tattooing is part of a larger Indian Renaissance and when blood calls you, it's too strong to deny."

I was lucky to have this lovely book on my coffee table for the last month, and any time I had a guest over—young, old, Native and non-Native—they would, without fail, reach for it, flip through its pages, marvel at the beauty and diversity, and remark on how little they knew about it, just as I had. This book presents these traditions with levity, generosity and respect, and most importantly, not as a dying or vanishing art form but one which is re-emerging, giving voice to the people to whom these traditions belong. ♥