Saying Our Share: Surviving the Missions

With special Art Editor, James Luna
SIMPPLY 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 Netsilingmiut 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
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 or 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 LaPenca, 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 though 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.”

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