



Watchlist: ‘How Alaska Native Women Are Healing From Generations of Trauma’

(Editor’s note: It is estimated that there are approximately 149 billion videos on YouTube, and the number continues to grow. Grand Ronde Tribal member and Social Media/Digital Journalist Kamiah Koch sifts through those myriad videos twice a month to recommend a worthwhile Indigenous video to watch. Follow her bimonthly recommendations and enjoy!)

By Kamiah Koch
Social Media/Digital Journalist

Al Jazeera’s YouTube channel, AJ+, focuses on telling stories of human rights and equality. In 2017, it published a three-part series sharing different Alaskan Native stories.

The final installment in the series is a video following Marjorie Kunaq Tahbone, an Inupiaq woman from Nome, who is healing her community by reviving the Indigenous tradition of facial tattoos.

“How Alaska Native Women Are Healing From Generations of Trauma” is a six-minute video explaining the historical and contemporary uses of Native tattoos.

Originally, facial tattoos were a way of honoring spirits and animals. Now, Tahbone says they are used as a way to heal from historic traumas.

The video describes practices like tattooing and dancing that were banned in Alaska in the early 1900s by missionaries and outsiders.

“They truly believed our way of living was demonic and we were heathens” Tahbone says in the video. “Our ability to come together as a community was broken.”

Tahbone says she felt the gap in the community’s ability to fully practice its cultural traditions back in 2012 so she took it upon herself to learn how to tattoo.

The video shares clips of Tahbone preparing to apply a chin tattoo and the ceremony behind

it. A seal oil lamp is lit as a way to bring ancestors into the process and the tattoo is applied by hand, without the use of a tattoo gun or machine.

“I wanted to give other woman an opportunity to get their traditional tattoos in a traditional way because there wasn’t that opportunity back in 2012,” Tahbone says. “They didn’t want a tattoo parlor, they wanted it to mean more. I realized it was much more than just putting ink into the skin, that it’s a really powerful ceremony.”

Tahbone says traditional tattoos in Alaskan Native communities are always done by women and symbolize strength and womanhood. Being able to reclaim that tradition and give it new meaning today is powerful, she says.

The video shows that reclaiming Native ways of life is seen in many other aspects of Tahbone’s life as well. Clips of her dancing with her community, eating traditional foods, wearing traditional clothes, learning the language and displaying her facial tattoo proudly are seen throughout the video.

Tahbone finishes the video by calling every day an act of defiance against the colonizers and their failed attempts at erasing her Native ancestor’s traditions.

To watch the video yourself, you can go to <https://youtu.be/FKJO1YyQMmY> or visit the *Smoke Signals* YouTube channel and find it in our Watchlist playlist. ■



Smoke Signals screenshot

Marjorie Kunaq Tahbone (Inupiaq) applies a tattoo to a woman’s chin as part of her effort to help her fellow Alaskan Natives heal from historical traumas in an Al Jazeera YouTube video called “How Alaska Native Women Are Healing From Generations of Trauma.”

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