

## **Creating Traditional Regalia: My Journey to a Master's Degree**

**Natasha Martin-Mitchell**

The topic of doing a project to close off my Master's degree came up through a conversation with one of the professors at UNB one day. I had not given much thought to what exactly I would be doing to complete my Master's degree but, since I was only beginning, I thought I had time to figure things out.

Time passed quickly, as it usually does, when I was contacted by my academic advisor Amanda Benjamin to decide what route I was going to take as I was short a few credits for graduation. She suggested I do a capstone project, since it was shorter than the regular project route and it would give me the credits required for graduation. I agreed.

I had to decide then what I should do for a project. I remembered that conversation I had previously had with the professor who had suggested at the beginning of my Master's degree to write a thesis about creating a traditional regalia. I said, "that's what I will do, create a traditional Mi'gmaq regalia and present it to the university in front of colleagues and faculty."

The next steps were to get this project accepted by the professor who was in charge of the class. I made an appointment and was confident that I was going to be able to do this. I also knew that the University was looking for ways to integrate various ways of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. This type of project would

highlight the importance of cultural revitalization through the re-introduction of cultural ceremonies and practices.

I met with the relevant professor and told him my ideas, and he was delighted to support the idea. He reminded me that one of the course objectives was to “give meaning to what may be perceived as isolated facts and pull them together into a personal or professional perspective.” This type of project would be a first at UNB.

I got to work researching old documents, began creating ideas and gathering up supplies I would need for my new traditional regalia. I am one who likes to reuse whatever material I can find, so off I went to Value Village to see if there was anything there I could use. I was successful in my search as I found the perfect material for my skirt. I also had material left over from other sewing projects, so I used that to create my jacket. I wanted to create a traditional Mi'gmaq outfit and each piece would have a special significance for me.

There are various parts to a regalia, as they represent the individual who wears them. I had always wanted to create a traditional Mi'gmaq peaked hat. This is something women wore years ago, and because it is so prominent, I wanted to see if I could create one for myself. After researching historical documents, I had what I needed to begin putting together my own traditional peaked hat. Although I found information about the hats, I was unsuccessful in obtaining information about the significance of the designs themselves on the various different hats. What I did find is that each design is significant, and I had to create a design that meant something to me.

## **Peaked Hat**

On my peaked hat, you will find two sets of intricate double curve motives on the left-hand side. For me, this represents my husband and me. On the opposite side, there are four sets of the double curve motives representing the family we have created together through the love we have for each other. The hat itself was created using suede material, various styles of ribbon, pearl beads, crystals and bias tape. I used crystals at the top of the double curve motive to remind our boys always to have the courage to sparkle.

An elder saw my regalia during the summer of 2018 and shared with me that, in her teachings, the black and white polka dots represent people with learning challenges. This is especially the case for children. She went on to explain that the kids who have more difficulty learning: when they see the polka dots, it calms them. She also asked why I put the rickrack (white squiggly line) on the peaked hat. I told her, in my mind it was just something that needed to be there. She said the squiggly line means that I like to shake things up and I am not afraid to push forward. It is a powerful symbol.

## **Skirt**

The design towards the bottom of the skirt has continuous red double curve motives connected together. This was created to resemble waves in an ocean. I included layers of ribbon on the bottom to represent the layers of the earth. The red symbols on the bottom represent anchors and are there remind me always to stay connected to the land and be humble. The material used is the beige cotton fabric I found at Value Village.

## **Jacket**

Also in my research, I came across many images of Mi'gmaq women who were wearing a bolero style jacket. I decided to re-create what women would have worn many years ago. My jacket resembles a bolero style jacket. It is made using red satin material. I included double curve motives on the edge of the sleeves using an applique method, and the design on the back reminds me to continue to reach out and grow. I also included a trim that matches the material I used to create the peaked hat. On the bottom of the jacket, I included the same style from my skirt - of various ribbon in layers - so it matches the rest of the outfit.

### **Shawl**

My shawl was a gift I received from a Cree woman from the James Bay Territory in Quebec. The shawl was used in her daughter's baptism, and she wanted to gift it to me to use as a part of my regalia. It is made from a white satin material. I added the design at the bottom. It is a bear paw print that surrounds the eight-pointed Mi'gmaq star. This symbolizes the bear clan. I also included a red fringe that hangs on the bottom of the shawl. This sways back and forth as I dance, resembling the swaying of grass in a field.

### **Medicine Bag**

The woman on my medicine bag represents my sister who passed on to the spirit world in 2017. Before she got sick, she had long dark brown hair and her favourite colour was anything blue and sparkly, so this is what inspired me to create my medicine bag. She is in the kneeling position, reminding me of the power of prayer. She is with me every time I dance and do ceremony.

## **Beadwork**

My beadwork is a custom piece set created just for me. It incorporates my colours: black, white, brown and gold. Red and turquoise were added as these are my favourite colours. After my sister died, my husband encouraged me to find someone who would be able to create my beadwork. He knows how important this is for me and suggested I hire someone who lived in northern Ontario.

After telling Mallory Knox of 'Create Beautiful Beads' the story of my sister, she happily accepted the job. The only thing I

asked her was that she keep her focus on the Mi'gmaq double curve motives and use the colours black, white, brown and gold, as these were my colours. She also asked me about my favourite colours, red and turquoise, which she wanted to incorporate into the design. I left all the creative part to her. I trusted that she would create something beautiful that I would love.



## **Moccasins**

For this particular regalia, I chose to use moccasins from Manitoba Mukluks as they have an insole on them. They are black with beadwork on the top of them.

## **Eagle Feather Fan**

My eagle feather fan was gifted to me over 20 years ago from a family relative. It is from the wing of an eagle and was decorated with eagle plumes on the bottom.



## **Conclusion**

For my Master's degree, I wanted to create a traditional regalia because I thought this was the perfect way to wrap up this chapter in my life. It is a powerful way to close this educational journey, but also a compelling beginning to what lies ahead. By creating and explaining the importance of traditional wear to my colleagues here at the University of New Brunswick, I am not only educating them, but I am also helping to decolonize the academy.

For the past four years, I have committed to completing the academic course requirements in order to obtain my degree. As a proud, strong Mi'gmaq woman, I felt it was my job to open doors for professors to see and experience different ways of learning. It was an incredibly fulfilling experience. Now it is time to shift my focus and learn to decolonize myself and concentrate on relearning more of my own Indigenous culture.

**Natasha Martin-Mitchell** is a proud Mi'kmaw woman from Listuguj First Nation, Quebec, who lives in Fredericton with her husband Brandon and sons Brayden and Bryce. A graduate of the MEd in Adult Education program at UNB and traditional dancer, Natasha has been integral in establishing the Red Shawl Campaign at UNB which, through ceremony and a range of interactive and creative educational activities, engages students and faculty across campus in honouring missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

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