Pien Penashue Builds a Canoe

2002

Pien Penashue builds a *katshishtashkuatet,* a type of canoe that uses nails.



Pien makes a canoe: Innu canoemaking project

Summer-Fall 2002

Pien Penashue, with apprentices, Melvin Penashue and Alistair Pone

In the summer and early fall of 2002, Innu Elder, Pien Penashue, from Sheshatshiu, Labrador, built a canoe for the Innu Exhibit at the Provincial Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador at The Rooms in St. John's. His son, Melvin, and his nephew, Alistair Pone, were apprentices. Anthropologist, Peter Armitage, documented the process, and CBC Television visited on several occasions to film the canoe-making and interview Pien, Melvin, Alistair, and others with the view to making a documentary film.

The Innu name for the type of canoe made by Pien and his apprentices is *katshishtashkuatet*, from *tshishtashkuan* - nail.

This page describes the canoe-making process.

Tools - axe (*ushtashk*^{*u*}), wooden wedge (*utakan*), wooden maul (*utamaikan*), crooked knife (*mukutakan*), pestle (*mitunishan*), hand plane, electric planer, chainsaw, metal rasp, handsaw, hammer.

Materials - white spruce (*minaik*^{ν}), nails, canvas, metal strapping, green & gray paint.

1. The Good Tree



Pien, Melvin, and Alistair built the canoe mostly at *Uhuniau* ("Owl Point," aka North West Point), about 5 km from Sheshatshiu and North West River, Labrador. Pien and his wife, Nishet, and several relatives, have cabins at the point. *Akamiuapishk^u* (Mealy Mountains) can be seen in the background across *Atatshi-uinipek^u* (Lake Melville).



Pien Penashue, the master canoe-maker. Born in 1926 in the *Akami-uapishk^u* area, Pien learned how to make the *katshishtashkuatet* (nail) canoe from his step-father, Pien Toma.



Nishet (Pokue) Penashue and Pien Penashue. Nishet told stories about canoeing and canoe-making in the days before settlement.



Melvin about to cut down a tree for canoe lumber. Canoe-making starts with the selection of the appropriate trees. They must be *minaik*^{*u*} (white spruce), tall and straight, with at least a couple of metres of trunk free of branches. Trees that have branches along the trunk or are twisted will cause a lot of grief because they cannot be split very easily, and knots (from the branches) do not make strong planking.

Pien pulled the bark off the tree in strips on one side so that he could examine the grain underneath and look for knots and other imperfections.



Melvin making a wooden *utakan* (wooden wedge). Several *utakan* are made to split the wood. They are often badly damaged by being hit with an axe or maul and must be replaced.

Tools such as the *utakan* were probably very important to the Innu in the days before metal could be obtained in trade with Europeans. But wooden tools do not turn up at archaeological sites because the wood rots over time.

A big part of being a good craftsman involves knowing which trees will make good lumber for canoes, toboggans, and snowshoes.



Pien driving the *utakan* into the *minaik*^{μ} to split it open. If the wood has a straight grain, it will "pop" open easily. Some of the thinner planks can even be split open with a knife if the grain is good.



Pien drives the *utakan* into the end of a log.



The *utakan* is used to split more narrow planks following the grain of the wood. These planks will be used for *anashkan* (planks) and *uatshinau* (ribs).



Pien uses a wooden maul (*utamaikan*) to hit the *utakan* and axe.



Melvin using an *utakan* to split the wood along the grain.



Alistair and Melvin splitting wood using a couple of *utakan*.



Raw, quartered lengths of *minaik^u* that must be split further for raw planking and ribs.



"Thin" planking ready for more thinning using a crooked knife, hand plane or electric planer.



Melvin cuts a length of *minaik*^u down the middle with a chainsaw. Each half of the tree will be used to make *minikukanashk*^u (gunwales).



Lumber for *minikukanashk*^u (gunwales).

2. The Planks



Alistair shaping thin planks using a hand plane. Pien watches on.



Alistair's *mukutakan* (crooked knife) that his grandfather, the late Matiu Penashue, gave him. The handle is covered with a weasel pelt.



The electric planer takes the place of the crooked knife, and saves considerable time in the canoe-making process.



Pien planing some more planking for the canoe.



Lumber drying to be used for planking and ribs.

3. The Gunwales



Melvin cutting thin strips of wood for the *minikukanashk*^u (gunwales).



The *minikukanashk^u* being laid out on the ground. The bow and stern must be bent upwards in order to create "rocker" in the canoe hull. "Rocker" is the round shape of the bottom of a canoe than determines how manoeuvrable the canoe will be. The more round it is, the more manoeuvrable is the canoe. Canoes will little rocker are not that manoeuvrable, but they "track well," that is, they can be paddled easily in a straight line.



Close-up of the end of the gunwales.



Melvin and Pien working on the gunwales. Temporary thwarts are used to hold the gunwales together until they can be attached to the ribs, and the permanent thwarts installed.

4. The Ribs



The "*mishta-passikan*" ("big gun") being used by Pien to soak ribs in boiling water prior to bending. This ingenious device consists of a piece of heavy pipe, stuck in the sand at an angle. It is filled with water and a fire built underneath to heat the water.



Pien bending canoe ribs (*uatshinau*). Despite his age (76 at the time), Pien had all the flexibility of a yoga master.



A stick is fixed in place across the ribs while they dry in order to hold their shape.



What drying ribs look like close up.

5. The Assembly



The canoe is assembled on a "bench" consisting of a couple of lengths of 2x4 lumber nailed to some short posts in the ground. The bottom planks and ribs are nailed temporarily to this bench. Once the canoe is fully ribbed and planked, the nails will be removed, and the canoe set free.



End view down the length of the canoe as it starts to take shape. Note how the ribs are tacked on to the bench as explained in the caption to the previous photograph. Permanent thwarts have been bolted to the gunwales (inwales) at this stage in the process, but there are still temporary thwarts in place as well.



Side view showing how the ribs are laid out along the bench with a gunwale frame (vertical stakes in ground with cross-bracing) in place.



Close up showing the *mishkutui* (stem batten) at the bow of the canoe.



Pien starts to attach planks to the bottom of the canoe.



Alistair holds a pestle (*mitunishan*) against the rib as Melvin hammers a nail through from the other side. The tip of the nail will bend against the metal pestle, thereby "riveting" the plank and the rib together.



Close up of a pestle (*mitunishan*). In the old days, the Innu made this tool out of stone.



Another view of the work site. The frame above the canoe was used to suspend a tarp for protection against the rain.



Planks tied in place temporarily until more planks could be added, and the ribs held firmly in place.



More planks being added, one by one.



Another view of the canoe as it gets planked.



Long shot of the canoe under construction.



The planking starts to climb up the side of the canoe.



Shimiu Rich pays a visit to the work site to check on progress.



Smaller pieces of planking are inserted at the bow and stern to fill in gaps.



Pien uses his *mukutakan* (crooked knife) to cut and break off portions of ribs that stick out past the gunwales.



Alistair uses a rasp to smooth down the ends of the ribs above the gunwales. All of the temporary thwarts have now been removed.



Alistair planing the ends of ribs above the gunwales.



The planking finished, the canoe is removed from the bench and taken to Pien's house in Sheshatshiu where it will be covered with canvas and painted.

6. The Finishing



New canvas being laid out on the hull of the canoe.



The canvas is now washed with hot, soapy water to prepare it for painting.



Alistair and Melvin painting the canoe. In the days before settlement, the Innu painted their canoes green or white with paint purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company in North West River.



Pien applies a metal stem plate to the bow and stern of the canoe. This metal strapping was found in Goose Bay lying about some old pallets.



Pien nailing a stem plate to the canoe.



Pien, Melvin, and Alistair attaching the *ashpitakaikan* (outwale) to the canoe.



Close up of the nearly completed canoe showing the *ashpitakaikan* (gunwale cap).



The completed canoe being readied for a temporary exhibit at the Labrador Interpretation Centre in North West River.