"Nakhwanh Gwich'in Khehłok Iidilii - We Are Our Own People"

Teetł'it Gwich'in Practices of Indigeneity: Connection to Land, Traditional Self-

Governance, and Elements of Self Determination

by

Elaine Donna Alexie
B.A., University of Victoria, 2011

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Political Science

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the practices of Indigeneity, acts of Indigenous social and cultural traditions stemming from Teetł'it Gwich'in land-based culture in the Northwest Territories. By emphasizing Teetł'it Gwich'in philosophy, this project illustrates how Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity are rooted in their social, physical, and cultural relationship with the land, which are central to Gwich'in self-determination. This thesis demonstrates traditional Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance practices are driven by cultural and social norms rooted in traditional knowledge, as well as contemporary Gwich'in-Canada relations. Utilizing knowledge collected from Teetł'it Gwich'in elders, these first-hand accounts show the connection between Canada and the Teetł'it Gwich'in through state policies that impede Teetł'it Gwich'in self-determination. By examining these challenges to their cultural practices, Teetł'it Gwich'in worldviews rooted in land-based practices is considered the basis for Gwich'in self-determination rooted in the physical and cultural landscape of Gwich'in lands.

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Acknowledgments

There are many that I am indebted to that in one form or another helped me succeed in my academic endeavours. First, I want to recognize the ancestral homelands of the Coast and Straits Salish Peoples. For four years I was situated on their ancestral lands to receive this education, to experience community and to witness the beautiful lands that belong to the original people.

Thank you to the University of Victoria and the Department of Political Science for the opportunity to learn there as a student. I want to recognize Brad Bryan and Matt James for inspiring me throughout my undergraduate degree and believing in me enough to write support letters for my grad school application. Your teachings and guidance in my earlier years enabled me to do the work I had done through my master's research with my people. Thank you. I want to say thank you to my supervisor, Heidi Stark, and James Tully, my second committee member for the amazing support I received throughout my degree. I am very grateful for the guidance I received. To the many professors over the years that helped me foster a love of learning and research that is essential to Indigenous scholarship. I want to recognize Warren Magnusson, Michael Asch, Martin Bunton, Mona Goode, Christine Obonsawin, Chris Anderson, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox, Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez, thank you all for the unwavering support and guidance through the many inspiring discussions that helped me grow and move forward as a student.

To the Teetł'it Gwich'in Elders that were willing to partake in my project and offered great assistance that I would not have imagined. Heartfelt support and encouragement was beyond what I expected. *Hai cho* for sharing your knowledge, spending time on the land with me, and helping me learn and grow during this process. This experience was truly medicine to my spirit. Thank you to Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute and the Aurora Research Institute for the assistance I received during and after my research stage. I am very grateful. Hai cho to elder Joanne Snowshoe for assisting with the Gwich'in language, and to Willyam Gorge Firth for supporting me on the translation work I required.

To my friends and support network that I received while in Victoria. I am very appreciative and thankful to you: Kaitlin, Dawn, Kelly, Rob, Serena, Laticia, Robina, Celina, Bronwyn, Miali and Jackie. Thank you to the Skookum Jim Friendship Center, the Gwich'in Tribal Council, and the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (ACUNS) for the financial support received that assisted me to complete my project.

To my family in the North, *Hai cho* for all the care packages, phone calls, and messages that helped offset the loneliness for the land and those that I hold close to my heart. To my loving partner, Adam Gaudry, who endlessly supported me beyond what I thought possible and constantly reminded me to believe in myself. It is through his support and reminders that made this thesis possible.

Dedication

To my grandparents, Robert and Dorothy, for all your unconditional love, support and guidance I received while going to school. I am very grateful for all the hard work, constant dedication, and cultural teachings that you brought into my life. You taught me to never forget who and where I came from. I will always remember the many ways in which you both gave me teachings to make me a stronger person and to be proud of who I am as Teetł'it Gwich'in.

To my relatives that were taken unexpectedly too soon from my family: my auntie Lizbeth, cousin Giddy, and beautiful Brandy Mariah. *Gehłichiidhiizhii Gwat Shanaondaih*. Until we meet again.

> And

To the future generations of Teetł'it Gwich'in.

Introduction

Gukagwiniidhat Dai' Nihs'at Gik'atr'aanjii - "In The Beginning We Learn From Each Other"

This thesis project, "*Nakhwanh Gwich'in Khehłok Iidilii*, We Are Our Own People," examines the practices of Indigeneity, which are the acts of Indigenous peoples practicing their social and cultural traditions stemming from their land-based cultures, among Teetł'it Gwich'in people from the Western Arctic community of Fort McPherson in the Northwest Territories. By emphasizing Teetł'it Gwich'in philosophy, this project illustrates how Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity are rooted in their social, physical, and cultural relationship with the land, which is fundamentally central to Gwich'in self-determination. This thesis argues that practices of Indigeneity are vital for understanding Teetł'it Gwich'in assertions of self-determination, by providing an alternative to state-based forms of governance. This form of Teetł'it Gwich'in governance is premised on traditional principles of respect, sharing, and reciprocity. By understanding practices of Teetł'it Gwich'in Indigeneity, this thesis demonstrates that Teetł'it Gwich'in traditional governance practices are driven by cultural and social norms rooted in traditional knowledge, while demonstrating also the complex nature of contemporary Gwich'in-state relations. Utilizing knowledge collected from interviews with Teetł'it Gwich'in elders and land-based practitioners, these first-hand accounts show the connection between Canadian and the Teetł'it Gwich'in through various state policies that impede Teetł'it Gwich'in self-determination. By examining these challenges to Teetł'it Gwich'in cultural practices, Gwich'in worldviews rooted in land-based practices is the basis for self-determination embedded within the cultural and physical landscape, and often well outside of state control.

Purpose Of This Study

When I began my research in 2012 it was from an entirely different standpoint, my initial

interest was in uncovering how western conceptions of state sovereignty affected

Indigenous nations, particularly my people, the Teetł'it Gwich'in. I was particularly

interested in how the exercise of state sovereignty in the contemporary context was

crucial to the debate over nation-state claims to the Arctic. I wanted to examine how my

people located themselves within the contemporary discourse of Arctic sovereignty. I

was eager to examine the complexity and nature of sovereignty, and most importantly,

how it functions to exclude an Indigenous presence within it. However, this re-

examination of political theory's discourse of sovereignty would constrain my description

of Gwich'in self-determination by using a foreign language to translate Teetł'it Gwich'in

concepts into western ones. How could I translate the perspectives of Teetł'it Gwich'in

elders in to western understandings of sovereignty? The stories from my elders did not

focus on hierarchicalized and coercive forms of power and authority, and translating

Gwich'in political ideals into this language would limit my ability to situate Indigenous

oral narratives in Gwich'in political worldviews.

　　　　Presenting the first-hand knowledge of Teetł'it Gwich'in elders, instead, seemed

to be the most appropriate way to understand my people's political philosophy. I've

adopted a Gwich'in perspective in understanding past and contemporary governance

issues. By spending time with my elders during the research process and learning from

their interviews, I have come to recognize the importance of Teetł'it Gwich'in knowledge

and that these perspectives are lost when translated into a foreign ideal like sovereignty.

A significant amount of Indigenous knowledge is necessary and needs to be experienced

to fully understand an Indigenous people's governance structures, customs, and

worldview. By centering Indigenous knowledge in my approach, Teetł'it Gwich'in

worldview perpetuates the political and cultural presence of Gwich'in on Gwich'in lands,

assisting in continuation of Gwich'in political, cultural, and spiritual practices. In this

light, I am interested in analyzing the knowledge of my people by focusing on the

cultural connections to land, animals, people, and governance principals, rooted in

traditional knowledge. The main ideas that were stressed in my discussions with elders

are twofold: First, how the on-going practice of land-based ways of life remain essential

to being Teetł'it Gwich'in, and second, how Gwich'in political autonomy and self-

government are centrally important to the existence of Teetł'it Gwich'in as an Indigenous

people.

The Teetł'it Gwich'in

The Teetł'it Gwich'in are a Dene people located in the Mackenzie Delta in the Northwest

Territories (NWT) of Canada. They are one of the original seven bands that comprised

the Gwich'in. Today, the Gwich'in Nation has membership of approximately over 9,000

people residing in 15 communities extending from the Northwest Territories to the

Yukon Territory, and into the Northeast part of Alaska. They are the northernmost

Athapaskan-speaking people in North America and have lived on their homelands since

time immemorial. The word 'Gwich'in' translates to 'the People' and Teetł'it Gwich'in

means 'People of the Headwaters' (Beaumont, 1998, p. 32). With close connections to

their land, many Gwich'in retain their land-based knowledge that makes them the people

of the headwaters (Ibid). The traditional homelands of the Teetł'it Gwich'in include the

Peel River watershed and the upper reaches of the Richardson Mountain Range in the Yukon and NWT. Up until the last century, Teetł'it Gwich'in were primarily a hunting, fishing, and harvesting people, who travelled according seasons to access the diverse resources available to them, resources like game, fish, berries and medicinal plants (Fafard & Kritsch, 2005, p. 6). The most vital resource to the people is the Porcupine caribou herd which provides food, medicines, hides for clothing and shelter, and bone tools that allow the people to survive in a harsh sub-Arctic environment. Gwich'in deeply respect the caribou, as displayed in a multitude of traditional stories about the importance of maintaining good relations with them (for example see Fafard & Kritsch, p.8). The Porcupine caribou herd continues to be a key component in the Gwich'in diet, and contemporary settlements were chosen largely for their proximity to the wintering range of the herd, as well as to fishing rivers. These choices have allowed Gwich'in to continue to maintain these relationships with the land and the many beings they share it with.

Teetł'it Gwich'in Political History
According to Gwich'in oral history, the earliest contact between Teetł'it Gwich'in and European fur traders occurred in 1839 (Beaumont, 1998, p. 34) when John Bell of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) met *Vitrshrinintsue Tyi*, known as 'Painted Face's Father' or 'Red Leggings' at *Ok Chì,* a prominent fishing location for his people (Fafard & Kritsch, 2005, p. 9). A year later, a trading post was established on the lower Peel River, but it was relocated several times as a result of spring flooding. This HBC trading post was re-named Fort McPherson in 1848, eventually becoming the settlement site where 792 Teetł'it Gwich'in live today (NWT Statistics, 2014). Fort McPherson is also known as *Teetł'it Zheh*, which translates to "Headwaters of the Peel House" and is the

largest Gwich'in settlement in the Mackenzie Delta. There are also three other Gwich'in communities nearby: Aklavik, Tsiigehtchic (formerly Arctic Red River), and Inuvik.

After 1848, many changes began to alter the livelihoods of the Indigenous peoples in the north. But in the interest of this thesis I will focus on two gradual changes that affected Gwich'in life. The first was the development of a fur trade economy and the second was the introduction of Christianity. At the beginning of the fur trade, most Teetł'it Gwich'in families continued their traditional way of life out on the land. On a seasonal basis, Teetł'it Gwich'in men would trade furs for European trade goods at the HBC post (Fafard & Kritsch, 2005, p.13-14). In later years, Teetł'it Gwich'in families would travel to the HBC post to trade and stay periodically for weeks during popular periods of holiday celebrations like Easter. At the turn of the century, the North-West Mounted Police set up a detachment in Fort McPherson (Alexie, 1997, p. 4). After 1920, Teetł'it Gwich'in families began to build cabins at Fort McPherson, as they desired more permanent housing options in order to stay at the HBC post for longer periods. After the Second World War, the fur economy experienced a rapid decline and the newly formed Government of the Northwest Territories sought to move away from a fur-based economy, focusing instead on building resource development infrastructure across the North (Christie, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; Christensen, 2011). New infrastructure was built to support this new economy: permanent western-style schools were established in Fort McPherson in 1946 (Alexie, 1997, p. 4) along with a nursing station, and institutions to deliver social services programs, like welfare, old age pensions, and family allowances (Fafard & Kritsch, 2005, p. 36). These programs were offered as an incentive for the NWT's Indigenous peoples to move permanently into the settlements, like Fort

McPherson. These changes supported the development of a permanent Gwich'in community at Fort McPherson, causing some families to transition into a sedentary way of life. But many Teetł'it Gwich'in families continued to support themselves out on the land by hunting, fishing, and trapping, either full-time, or increasingly, on a seasonal basis (ibid).

The other influential change for the Teetł'it Gwich'in would be the introduction of Christianity. As early as in 1858 the Anglican Church was missionizing among the Gwich'in, who first heard the gospels along the Mackenzie River (Beaumont, 1998, p. 34). At the time, both Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries competed to convert as many Indigenous people as possible across the North, but it was the Anglican Church that would most effectively connected to the Teetł'it Gwich'in people. A permanent Anglican Mission in Fort McPherson was established in 1860 (Alexie, 1997, p. 4). The early relationship between the Teetł'it Gwich'in and the Anglican Church was successful due to the popularity of the Métis Archdeacon Robert McDonald. McDonald was respected of Gwich'in ways and in return became an influential spiritual advisor among the people. In order to more effectively reach out to the people, McDonald translated the bible and other seminal Christian texts into the Gwich'in language, developing the first written alphabetic representation of Gwich'in, which is still used today in weekly church services and language revitalization activities.

The discovery of oil deposits along the Mackenzie River in 1919 prompted the Canadian government to initiate treaty-making in the North in order to make land settlement possible and for the federal government to secure access to non-renewable resources. Treaty 11 was negotiated with the Dene, including the Teetł'it Gwich'in in

1921 (Ibid; Dene Nation, 1984, p. 17). On July 28, 1921 Chief Julius Salu of Teetł'it

Zheh alongside community "headmen" signed the treaty, under the condition that the

livelihoods of the Teetł'it Gwich'in would not be disturbed by settlement or development

activities (Fumouleau, 2004, p. 240). The Teetł'it Gwich'in understood the treaty as a

peace agreement with the Crown and were emphatic land title was not affected by the

signing or would it prevent them from hunting or travelling within their lands

(Fumouleau, p. 240-243; Alexie, 1997, p. 4). Treaty 11 remains a cornerstone for First

Nation-Canada relations in Denendeh[1] said to signify an enduring, peaceful and mutually

beneficial partnership between First Nations and the British Crown. The non-

implementation and broken promises of Treaty 11 has led to numerous disputes over the

treaty's meaning, resulting in the comprehensive land claims process, which included the

negotiation for Gwich'in self-governance (Ibid). Under this land claim vision,

Aboriginal self-government placed Indigenous peoples squarely within the settler polity

and intending for them to integrate both socially and economically into the mainstream

society (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, p. 60).

On April 22, 1992, the Gwich'in signed a Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement

(GCLCA) with the Government of Northwest Territories (GNWT) and with the

Government of Canada. Under this agreement, the Gwich'in would be provided rights

and ownership to certain lands and resources in their defined land claim area. In

exchange for this, the Gwich'in gave up their rights as outlined in Treaty 11 to water and

lands in Canada (Gwich'in Tribal Council, 2000, p. 2). The Gwich'in received fee simple

title to 9,258 square miles of lands that includes overlapping surface and subsurface

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[1] The belief that the Dene people, in what is now defined as the region of Northwest Territories, call the land

rights in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon, and $75 million dollars over a fifteen-

year period (1992-2007), including annual royalties from the GNWT. The GCLCA

identified five areas where Gwich'in possessed an Aboriginal right of self-government,

under a new governing body, the Gwich'in Tribal Council. This new political entity

possessed jurisdiction over the lands and financial compensation issued under the

GCLCA, but also was responsible for co-management of wildlife harvesting, land and

water regulation, and Aboriginal self-governance (Alexie, 1997, p. 7). The mandate of

the Gwich'in Tribal Council is to protect the rights of the people as defined in their land

claim, and to strive to be economically, socially, and politically self reliant (Gwich'in

Tribal Council, 2015).

Literature Review

A number of academic studies focusing on the cultural and social expressions of the

Gwich'in informed this research project. These studies exemplify Gwich'in ways of life

and explore many aspects of Gwich'in Indigeneity, demonstrating how Gwich'in social

and cultural institutions are significant in ongoing land-based practices and essential to

traditional governance structures. Much of the academic research that examines

Gwich'in ways of life is anthropological in origin, but there is also a growing number of

community-based research projects which shows a broadening of scholarship in Gwich'in

studies.

The longstanding use of ethnography-based accounts in anthropological texts

illustrates the cultural and social traditions of the Gwich'in. American Anthropologist

Richard Slobodin (1962) published a condensed version of his dissertation with the

National Museum of Canada, entitled *Band Organization of the Peel River Kutchin.*[2]

Slobodin's ethnography focuses on the role of social organizations in the hunting

economies of the Teetł'it Gwich'in (p. 5). Attempting to refute uni-linear cultural

theorists on cultural change (p. 1), Slobodin demonstrates how the Peel River Kutchin

display cultural resiliency and adaptability when negotiating interaction with outside

influences, particularly the encroachment of European cultural norms in Gwich'in lives

(p. 5). His work provides an outsider lens into the cultural, social, and economic

traditions of the Teetł'it Gwich'in, paying particular attention to the leadership practices

in Teetł'it Gwich'in political institutions (p. 72). Slobodin's work is important because it

illustrates how leadership functioned within the social fabric of Gwich'in culture and

provides an understanding of cultural adaptations to external forces. Perhaps of greater

relevance, Slobodin's work describes Gwich'in life from the late 1940s, a time of

significant social and political transition among the Teetł'it Gwich'in.

An important aspect of contemporary Teetł'it Gwich'in life is that families

continue to practice land-based subsistence in their territory. Robert Wishart (2004)

illustrates how the Teetł'it Gwich'in maintain land-based 'cultural continuity' through

subsistence practices (p. 154). His work responds to many outside agencies that often

developed negative perspectives of the Gwich'in seeking to define, categorize, and

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[2] There were several variations of descriptions found in early texts that sought to illustrate the Gwich'in people over the past two centuries. The earliest descriptions used were by explorers and traders from the Northwest Company and later Hudson Bay Company who referred the people as *Loucheux,* translated from French as 'Slanted Eyes.' Descriptions would then come to include *Kutchin* translating as 'the people' in the latter part of the 19th century. Anglican Church missionaries recorded and translated the Gwich'in language into biblical works describing the language and people as *Tukudh* or *Takudh* interchangeably. Using standardized orthography, the modern spelling of *Kutchin* is more *Gwich'in*. Since the late 1980s, this term was chosen among the people to use the name *Gwich'in*, as it translates from the language as "the people or people of," and it has been in use since and prior to the signing of the NWT Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (GCLCA) in 1992. While in Alaska and NWT communities, the spelling of *Gwich'in* is preferably used; in the Yukon it is *Gwitch'in*.

colonize the Gwich'in and displace their worldviews (p. 5). For example, through policy enforcement in natural resources management (p. 145) Wishart argues that the territorial government sought to "colonize the consciousness" (p. 207) of the Gwich'in in order to alter their relationship to their land. Natural resource policy, Wishart argues, draws upon external ideas and views of land as being "wilderness" (p. 125). This runs counter to Gwich'in perspectives of land as a series of interrelated relationships that exists between people, animals, and the living landscape (p. 207). Wishart suggests that Teetł'it Gwich'in elders maintain a cultural ethos of land-based living by being out on the land, ensuring the continuity of their culture and serving as a form of active resistance against the colonial structures that have been imposed on them. Wishart's work provides a clear illustration of the ability to transmit land-based knowledge among the Gwich'in families as dependent upon the ability of individuals to maintain their connection to land, and their ability to practice land-based knowledge, individually and collectively. His work affirms that there is a continual relationship between the Teetł'it Gwich'in and their lands that remains alive today.

A central component for the continuation of Indigenous culture is its ability to be transmitted to future generations. Dutch anthropologist Peter Loovers (2010) examines the important role of traditional pedagogy in Teetł'it Gwich'in culture. By providing examples of Gwich'in pedagogy, he argues that the Gwich'in have a coherent way of viewing the world that is often denied or dismissed (p. 39). Loovers examines the historical and political processes that have lasting impacts on the Teetł'it Gwich'in, particularly in the area of inter-governmental relations (p. 138). Loovers argues that these processes provide an instrumental understanding of Teetł'it Gwich'in worldviews and

their understandings of life (p. 304). Gwich'in pedagogy continues to play an active role in Teetł'it Gwich'in land-based practices during life on the land (pg. 158-167). Loovers depicts Teetł'it Gwich'in connections to land and all of the relationships stemming from it, including how the Gwich'in conceive of the interrelations of land, people, animals, and non-human forms surrounds the concept of *gwiinzii kwùndei,* the good life (p. 199). By invoking a 'You Have to Live It' approach under the direction of a Teetł'it Gwich'in elder (p. 25-27), Loovers provides ethnographic accounts of his experiences with the Teetł'it Gwich'in people out on the land and in the community of Teetł'it Zheh. This approach was instrumental to his learning the cultural traditions and understanding the cultural worldviews of the Teetł'it Gwich'in.

Aspects of Gwich'in leadership are central to the everyday traditions and health of the people. Gwich'in scholar Crystal Frank (2011) examines intergenerational cultural loss among the Alaskan Gwich'in. Frank argues this loss is due to structural displacement of traditional Gwich'in leadership qualities, stemming from the normalization and adaptation of western leadership styles. As cultural loss affects Gwich'in communities in multiple ways, Frank asserts that there is a need to address cultural loss among the younger generation (p. 19). By developing leadership skills that are foundational to Gwich'in culture, Frank argues that Gwich'in can create healthier individuals and stronger communities. To deal with cultural loss among the Gwich'in, Frank argues for cultural empowerment through community-based initiatives targeted at young people is necessary to create healthy individuals and communities (p. 19-20). By researching traditional leadership practices, Frank worked closely with Gwich'in elders, unveiling a curriculum model that is based upon culturally relevant activities to build

leadership skills that are meaningful for youth in Gwich'in communities (p. 12). These activities were designed under the guidance of elders on land-based activities, such as drum-making (p. 50) and cooking traditional foods over an open fire (p. 55), teaching lessons on culturally relevant personal development, and building leadership skills. Frank asserts that the teachings of leadership principles based on Gwich'in values can help empower, and heal the youth by rebuilding skills rooted in ancestral knowledge (p. 20). Regaining Gwich'in knowledge through individual leadership skills can help build individual skills in culture and communities. Frank's work is refreshing and is culturally relevant from a community perspective. Her work provides emphasizes community needs for Alaska Gwich'in communities, but it is relevant for NWT communities as well.

Shelah Marie Beairsto (1999) in her MA thesis, *"Dinjii Kat Chih Ahaa: Gwitch'in Notions of Leadership,"* explores the transmission of Gwich'in leadership skills. Beairsto's research examines how the Vuntut Gwitch'in people in the northern Yukon continue to select leaders based on traditional leadership qualities. Beairsto's research addresses the importance of leadership in Gwich'in culture and community and argues that despite the influence of Western leadership norms, the Vuntut Gwitch'in people continue to practice leadership styles consistent with older Gwich'in standards of leadership. Using the accounts of Gwich'in elder Edith Josie and historical documentation on Gwich'in leadership, Beirsto argues that there are consistent leadership characteristics common to almost all successful Gwich'in leaders (p. 4), including the ability to communicate effectively, a commitment to serving the people, a knowledge of land and traditions, and sharing of wealth (p. 20). These characteristics are still ingrained in the social and cultural practices of Vuntut Gwitch'in. What is perhaps most important

about Beirsto's work is her use of oral knowledge as depicted through the life of elder

Edith Josie and the use of Gwich'in legends in identifying leadership qualities. Beirsto

uses two Gwich'in legends to support her analysis. The first is Verna Wallis' widely-read

Two Old Women (1993), which describes the importance of leaders in maintaining the

social welfare of the people using their mediation skills (p. 117). She also uses "Man

without Fire", which shows how successful Gwich'in leaders are chosen for their

immense knowledge of the land and how to survive on it (p. 116). Like many Indigenous

communities, stories told by elders plays an important role in knowledge transmission

and gives agency to the people in perpetuating and maintaining their cultural practices.

Elders play an important role in Gwich'in culture. They are valuable knowledge

holders that are key to the health of communities and the people who live there. Shawn

Wilson (1997) examines the central role of elders in the Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in

community of Fort Yukon, Alaska. As a result of cultural loss and other social ills

associated with colonization in the North, Wilson suggests that Indigenous peoples

should re-center the important role that elders play in the health of their communities.

Wilson differentiates elders and the elderly noting that an elder is someone who

possesses traditional knowledge and is seen by the community as a reminder of the

strength of the old ways. They are a bridge between the past and of the present and are

considered a key figure in the community (p. 7). An elderly person on the other hand, is

someone who is older, but does not possess traditional knowledge and skills. In order to

heal from the effects of colonization elders must be re-established in a central place

within the community (p. 2). Part of that healing involves having elders set an example

by living a sober life and by providing spaces that offer forgiveness of wrongdoing to

enable their own healing. Elders walk a fine line between two worlds, the past and the

present. An elder represents a form of continuity of the past into the present and are there

to support and guide the people in the cultural traditions (p. 56). Wilson maintains that by

doing so, communities can begin to rekindle their social structures (p. 48) kinship

relations, and centered approaches to ongoing healing for communities (p. 57). He

argues that strong, healthy elders are essential in the healing process of communities.

Like Frank's work on youth and leadership development, the empowerment of elders is

central to the health of the people that can enable communities to take pro-active and

meaningful initiatives to heal their communities.

There are also many cultural-based publications developed by the Gwich'in

Social and Cultural Institute that focuses on the cultural history of the Gwich'in, such as

the booklet "*Yeendoo Daì Gwatsat Teetł'it Zheh Googwandak: The History and

Archeology of Fort McPherson."* This book illustrates the development of Fort

McPherson as an early settlement and community over a 150-year period, including the

social and cultural history of the Teetł'it Gwich'in. The accounts shared by elders provide

detail of the life and land-based practices of the Teetł'it Gwich'in during a period of

cultural transition. Elder narratives provide insight into the changes during this period,

including early settler and their relationships with Teetł'it Gwich'in. The accounts of the

early relationships with the Hudson Bay Company, the Anglican missionaries and the

Royal Canadian Mounted Police tells of the emergence and formation of the settlement,

which would become the social, religious, and economic centre for these agencies and the

home of Teetł'it Gwich'in people today (Fafard & Kritsch, 2005, p. 5). This booklet

provides insight on the social and cultural history of Teetł'it Zheh, including the changes

during important periods of cultural and societal change in the North, including the

Klondike Gold Rush (p. 26-27) and the signing of Treaty 11 in 1921 (p. 34-35).

Placing Myself In The Research

When I began my academic journey, I did not anticipate finding myself in a place where I

would be writing a thesis on my home community. It has been a personal journey of ups

and downs that challenged me at every stage. My experiences ranged from positive to

negative, which I feel contributed to my research experience and helped me utilize

community-based research methods and unearth a greater understanding of my own

people's worldview. I experienced rewarding conversations with many elders from my

community. I often felt frustrated in expressing the complexity of a Gwich'in worldview

and the necessity of translating the ideas conveyed by the elders that I interviewed into

common academic language. This was not always an easy fit. My personal experience

includes a traditional understanding of governance passed down within my family

through my upbringing out on the land. This way of governing does not neatly fit into the

political categories that academics construct. Still, my experience with elders during this

research project has been profound, as it has continued to shape my understanding of my

people's cultural practices that shapes what it means to be Teetł'it Gwich'in. Conducting

research in a community I grew up in can be both challenging and rewarding. All of the

project participants are individuals that I have known my whole life, and some of these

elders are my relatives. Even though this is the case, much of my analysis is based upon

my training in political science, not just my relationships and upbringing in Teetł'it Zheh.

This research, then, represents a bridging of my academic training and my place in the world as a Teetł'it Gwich'in.

The Importance Of Land-Based Practices of Indigeneity

I am interested in the concept of Indigeneity because it identifies the importance of land and culture in being Indigenous. One of the most important land-based teachings I grew up with was handed down to me by my grandparents Robert and Dorothy. Growing up in my traditional territory was a culturally enriching experience. I am from a generation that was able to learn these teachings on the land and I am equally fortunate to have been able to learn directly from knowledge-holders. Among those younger than me, due to the intergenerational impact of colonialism, most do not have these kinds of experiences, which has resulted in knowledge loss or a severed connection to the land. I am from the last generation that spent much of my childhood in the bush.

As a result, I experienced a freedom to practice my Gwich'in culture while exploring my Teetł'it Gwich'in territory and learning land-based skills from my grandparents who raised me. Equally important was that I have been able to spend time living my culture throughout the seasonal round. My most-cherished childhood memories are of passing the spring with my family at our camp at Trail River along the Peel River, which has been used for generations in our family. The Teetł'it Gwich'in place name for Trail River is called *Tr'atr'aataii tshik*—The People's Trail, At The Mouth. It was at locations like *Tr'atr'aataii tshik* that I was able to ground myself in the cultural teachings of my people and where my family guided me along that process. This place was therefore instrumental to my learning. My childhood upbringing enabled me to gain first-hand experiences of the world by living my culture on my ancestral homelands. It has

also fostered in me an understanding of importance of practices of Indigeneity for being Teetł'it Gwich'in.

Being on the land enabled Teetł'it Gwich'in families like mine to practice our Indigeneity and to be self-sustaining, receiving all that we needed from the land. On the land experiences – such as harvesting, hunting and fishing traditional foods, cutting wood, telling traditional stories and place-based histories, gathering medicines, travelling on the land and on the rivers, and tanning moose hides - imprinted my culture onto me and shaped who I am as a Teetł'it Gwich'in person. These practices have constructed my worldview as an Indigenous person, playing a pivotal role in my continued relationship to the land and the people around me. Land-based practices facilitate a way of being, in a cultural sense, but also contribute to the conceptualization of Teetł'it Gwich'in worldviews. Practices of Indigeneity are grounded in teachings of ancestral knowledge and vital for cultural and spiritual continuity. They also strengthen one's connection to ancestral homelands, to families and communities. Practices of Indigeneity are how Indigenous people's knowledge of social and cultural traditions are informed by their land-based connections. They allow Indigenous cultures to merge the physical, emotional, and spiritual traditions arising from these connections. These Indigenous traditions, and the wellness that they foster, facilitates the cultural continuity of Indigenous societies. Without the land there is no culture to practice, there is no Indigeneity, and Indigeneity must be practiced.

Methodological Approach
The goal of this thesis project is to present a Gwich'in worldview of the land-based practices that define who we are and how we govern ourselves. It is vital that the

methodological approach used respects and empowers Teetł'it Gwich'in voices. My

research approach utilized a methodological approach that, as Smith (1999) suggests,

incorporates an Indigenous worldview and respects Indigenous knowledges when

working in the community of Teetł'it Zheh. It employs a decolonizing methodological

approach (Thomas, 2005; Gaudry, 2011), including participatory action research methods

(Silver, 2006; Rutman et al. 2005), with a focus on strengthening community

relationships through the completion of the research project (Wilson, 2008). This project

incorporates Teetł'it Gwich'in knowledge as the basis for analysis. Doing so requires the

researcher to consult the oral traditions and lived experiences of community members

from Teetł'it Zheh through interviews and conversations with them. By gaining an

understanding of Teetł'it Gwich'in land-based practices, I can contribute to Gwich'in

discussions about the roles of these practices in contemporary Teetł'it Gwich'in lives.

In the fall of 2012, I interviewed nine elders from Teetlł'it Zheh after receiving

human research ethics approval from the University of Victoria, as well as regional

approvals from the Aurora Research Institute (ARI) and the Gwich'in Social and Cultural

Institute (GSCI). Every stage of the consultation and recruitment process involved key

community organizations, such as ARI and the GSCI, who assisted me in developing a

recruiting protocol for potential interviewees, including a call for participants on the

Teetł'it Zheh community radio station, CBQM. The community radio station is

considered to be the most effective and most popular way of communicating about

research projects in Teetł'it Zheh and the surrounding area. Immediately after my radio

announcement, I had elders inquire about my project. I made home visits and discussed

my research interests in Teetł'it Gwich'in traditional knowledge. I stressed that they were

under no obligation to participate unless they wanted to do so and noted that participants

had the choice to withdraw their participation at any given time. I also gave all

participants the option to remain anonymous in the project.[3]

The elders that I had spoken to agreed to participate in my research and the

interviews ranged between 45 minutes to several hours in length. When it came to finding

a location I left it up to the participants to decide what was best suited for them, either in

the comfort of their homes, at the band office, or out on the land. Two interviews were

conducted in the homes of the interviewees, and another two at their family bush camp

outside the community, while the remainder took place at my family's bush camp on the

Peel River. Conducting the interviews outside of the community was important to some

elders, as there were no distractions in the home and we were on the land while

discussing the importance of being on the land. I found this was beneficial to many of

the discussions that emerged during the interview process.

I designed a set of open-ended questions for the interviews that was intended to be

a guide, but not a script. When it was required, I used the questions to help start the

discussion, but had mainly left it up to the participants to determine what was important

and what they wished to share with me about aspects of Teetł'it Gwich'in governance

through practices of Indigeneity. As my discussions varied from participant to

participant, some of topics that emerged led me into areas that I did not anticipate. All the

discussions had offered me greater awareness of my research area in a more vivid and

complex detail. All of the interviews were recorded on an audio device for accuracy

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[3] One research participant wished to remain anonymous, while the rest of the participants
agreed to have their identification open to the public.

during the discussions and later transcribed for further analysis. The emphasis of

recording this knowledge is to articulate a community-based perspective and to lend

legitimacy to the voices of Teetł'it Gwich'in.

As I completed the chapters of this thesis, I sent draft versions to the elders for

approval, and clarification. At each stage of the process I included these elders to ensure

that I kept to the original intent and voice of the elders intact. My responsibility in

conducting this research is to convey what was shared with me from the stories of elders

in hopes that it can shed light and offers a refreshing perspective on how essential

traditional governance is to the future of the Teetł'it Gwich'in.

Chapter Outlines

My thesis explores the many ways in which land-based practices structure Teetł'it

Gwich'in Indigeneity by defining these activities as *practices of Indigeneity*. I have

highlighted these narratives in three distinct chapters. Chapter One analyzes the politics

and practices of Indigeneity and argues that practices of Indigeneity are crucial for self-

determination and self-governance. Teetł'it Gwich'in are shaped by their Indigeneity, but

these underlying land-based practices can be overlooked when seeking to understand the

Teetł'it Gwich'in self-determination. This chapter evaluates the Canada- Teetł'it

Gwich'in political relationship as defined by contemporary land claims and self-

government agreements. It then examines Dene and Gwich'in political philosophy to

demonstrate the importance of reigniting practices of Indigeneity and abandoning state

processes for reconciliation. It concludes that, in order for true Teetł'it Gwich'in self-

determination to be possible, the ability to practice their Indigeneity through land-based

practice is required.

Chapter Two examines several policies implemented by the federal and territorial governments and the social and cultural impacts on the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Teetł'it Gwich'in elders stories demonstrate how they were (and continue to be) affected by the introduction of social housing and the forceful removal of Teetł'it Gwich'in children from their families to attend residential school, all of which resulted in an erosion of Teetł'it Gwich'in presence on the land and the knowledge that this taught. Teetł'it Gwich'in knowledge transmission is land based and when they are no longer on the land their knowledge transmission is severed to the next generation. This chapter also highlights the changing leadership structures of Teetł'it Gwich'in under the guise of the *Indian Act* in Teetł'it Zheh, changing how Teetł'it Gwich'in governed themselves. The elder accounts demonstrate how this colonial undertaking sought to assimilate Teetł'it Gwich'in by eliminating land-based knowledge and the ability to survive outside the reach of government.

Chapter Three explores Teetł'it Gwich'in elder stories in describing how their practices of Indigeneity define who they are as Teetł'it Gwich'in. The narratives they share highlights the importance of connection to lands, Gwich'in governance, and spiritual and cultural wellness stemming from land-based practices in Teetł'it Gwich'in political philosophy. By defining Gwich'in self-determination as preserving their cultural, spiritual, and physical connections to land, scholars can better understand how these practices enable Gwich'in cultural and political freedom.

The last section of this thesis will present my concluding remarks on the findings of this thesis project. Guided by the knowledge shared with me by Teetł'it Gwich'in elders, I propose a way forward by situating Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity as

a way to provide physical, spiritual and cultural continuity, and importantly, to assert our

self-determination as Indigenous peoples.

Chapter One: The Politics and Practice of Indigeneity

Introduction

Indigenous peoples have been in a continuous battle with settler states for political recognition and cultural freedom since colonization began. From local community-specific struggles to emerging global social movements, Indigenous nations continually challenge state control within the domestic and international arenas (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009; Maaka & Fleras, 2005). However, as their relationships with settler states remains contentious, Indigenous nations continue to endure oppressive policies inflicted on them by state bureaucracies. To combat this, Indigenous scholars have called for cultural and spiritual renewal, a reawakening of the political, spiritual, and cultural practices that define who we are (Alfred, 1999, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). These acts of renewal are rooted in decolonial and cultural resurgence efforts that call for a return to the land-based practices that are central to Indigenous identity, often referred to as Indigeneity. Indigeneity, then, is guided by traditional knowledge and informed by land based practices, allowing Indigenous peoples to live their cultures, define who they are on their own terms, and renew their cultural and spiritual identities. Indigeneity also grounds definitive assertions of Indigenous self-determination through acts of local self-governance. In short, Indigeneity is the cultural, spiritual, physical essence of what it means to be "Indigenous" in practice. Practices of Indigeneity entail Indigenous people living their cultural, physical, spiritual and social traditions based upon their own philosophies and systems of governance. In the international arena, the idea of Indigeneity is central to Indigenous assertions of their place in the family of nations. As practices of Indigeneity renew the political, a spiritual, and cultural assertion of

Indigenous peoples, these practices distinguishes Indigenous peoples from the exclusionary system of sovereignty that most nation-states continue to exercise (Maaka & Fleras, 2005; Alfred, 2005; Christie, 2011).

In this chapter, I introduce practices of Indigeneity as a framework for exploring the critical the cultural and political recognition struggles of the Teetł'it Gwich'in. The concept of Indigeneity should not be understood only as a tool that explores the existence of Indigenous peoples in relation to the state. Instead, it should also be understood as the force that defines, maintains, and reproduces the Teetł'it Gwich'in as a self-governing people. Throughout the first part of this chapter, I will define practices of Indigeneity, as it exists in the scholarly literature and apply it to the political relationships between Canada and the Teetł'it Gwich'in. The second part of the chapter examines elements of Dene and Gwich'in political philosophy to demonstrate the importance of reigniting practices of Indigeneity as a way for Indigenous peoples to assert their self-determination. In doing so, this section will demonstrate how local practices of Indigeneity, the essential practice of being Indigenous, are carried out through the cultural practice of moose hide tanning.

Defining Indigeneity

Indigeneity is a concept that represents the many political, social, and spiritual ways of being Indigenous and the worldviews that accompany them. Practices of Indigeneity are a fundamental component of Indigenous peoples' affirmations of land-based governance. These consist of activities that foster physical, spiritual, emotional, and cultural wellness that contributes to the self-determination of their people. In an international legal

framework, James Anaya (2004) defines self-determination as "a universe of human rights precepts concerned broadly with peoples, including Indigenous peoples, and grounded in the idea that all are equally entitled to control their own destinies. Self-determination gives rise to remedies that tear at the legacies of empires, discrimination, suppression of democratic participation, and cultural suffocation" (p. 75). However, within this international framework, Jeff Corntassel (2008), also acknowledges the need to work outside the state-based processes that international law relies upon. Instead, he proposes a more holistic and regenerative approach for Indigenous people he calls *sustainable self-determination* (p. 105). Sustainable self-determination exists outside state constructs that enable a more local and regional practice of Indigenous self-governance, including relationship to land, food security, community governance, and ceremonial life (p. 119). Corntassel argues sustainable self-determination will "regenerate the implementation of Indigenous natural laws on Indigenous homelands and expand the scope of an Indigenous self-determination process" (ibid). He demonstrates that the relationship between Indigeneity and self-determination are interrelated and rely on one another to function. Drawing on Corntassel's definition of self-determination, understanding the fundamental role of Indigenous self-determination, then, is integral in learning about the holistic nature of being Indigenous.

As an embodiment of Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigeneity defines Indigenous peoples distinct land-based existence and their autonomous governance. Characteristics of Indigeneity can vary from region to region, but it commonly shares a set of ideals that speak to the distinct political and cultural institutions that make up

Indigenous nations. Zapotec Political Scientist Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez (2013) defines

the complex nature of Indigeneity as:

> the product of the articulatory practices of Indigenous peoples at different sites, and it constitutes a field where power, social practices, knowledge, governance and hierarchies are produced, contested, negotiated, and altered in the process of producing the meanings of Indigeneity (p. 4).

Indigeneity is comprised of the everyday practices of Indigenous communities' cultural

and political traditions that are central to the cultural continuity and spiritual wellness of

their people. Harris and Wasileski (2004) define Indigeneity as an articulation of

Indigenous values passed down from generation to generation and is represented within

four main core principles embedded within Indigenous societies. The core values of

Indigeneity are thus: 1) relationship is a kinship responsibility, 2) responsibility is a

community obligation, 3) reciprocity is a cyclical obligation, and 4) redistribution is a

sharing obligation (p. 492-493). These four values describing Indigeneity encompass the

importance of maintaining specific kinds of relationships with others as a generating

factor for building community. It also highlights responsibility to a community to protect

and to take care of, reciprocity for showing respect with others, and redistribution as a

form of sharing that generates respect.

Practices of Indigeneity not only shape Indigenous peoples' worldviews, but can

also be informed and influenced by the domestic, national and the international

community of nation-states. The concept of Indigeneity has been conveyed in scholarly

writing in numerous ways, including relational forms (Merlan, 2009, p. 305). According

to Merlan, definitions of Indigeneity rely on racialized constructions of identity through

various conditions connected to state government recognition and colonial institutions

that allow people to identify as Indigenous (ibid). Relational definitions of Indigeneity

pay attention to the relationships that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

people, which in result gives Indigeneity it's meaning in particular colonial constructs

(ibid). Roger Maaka and Augie Fleras (2005) find Indigeneity comparable in some ways

with the concept of ethnicity. Indigeneity represents the nominalization of the adjective

"Indigenous" where "Indigeneity points to a thing or process and rather a modifier"(p.

53). As a form parallel to ethnicity, Indigeneity also acts as a political ideology and

social movement led by the awareness by Indigenous nations that they hold original

occupancy, asserting this claim against the state's pretension of ownership of Indigenous

lands (p. 53). A significant part of this process surrounding the principles of Indigeneity

is that Indigeneity acts as a primary solution to the colonial status quo. It is not just a

social construct created to assert political action on Indigenous rights protections. It also

is a way of being that enables Indigenous communities to ensure they thrive in a world

imposed on them by settler societies (Christie, 2011). The concept of Indigeneity is

complex and varies from place to place (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013). However, a range of

scholarship that focuses on the relevance of the practice of Indigeneity can also be used

to address the status of Indigenous peoples found within the constitutional order of the

settler state.

Practices of Indigeneity: A Review of Existing Literature

A number of scholarly texts evoke Indigeneity to analyze the relationship between

Indigenous nations and settler governments. Much scholarship in this area demonstrates

that Indigenous peoples have engaged in asserting and upholding their Indigeneity

against state institutions, while other scholars consider integration into state constitutions

as a move towards the positive co-existence of Indigenous peoples and settler

populations. For most scholars writing on the topic, practices of Indigeneity provide

cultural continuity among Indigenous nations that challenge the dominant political order

of settler politics. This move is significant in understanding the importance of Indigeneity

for Indigenous nations.

Roger Maaka and Augie Fleras (2005) in *The Politics of Indigeneity*, examine the

contested relationship between Indigenous nations and setter societies, envisioning the

possibility of a more inclusive post-colonial relationship. In doing so, they call for a

middle ground of recognizing and accommodating Indigenous peoples and their practices

of Indigeneity within the settler state's constitutional politics (p. 256). For Maaka and

Fleras, Indigeneity not only challenges settler authority, but also allows for co-existence

within the dominant society (p. 53) providing solutions for belonging that "embrace the

post-sovereign notion of 'nation' of multiple yet shared jurisdictions" (p. 207).

Indigenous nations striving for autonomy in a contested setting is the fundamental feature

of Indigeneity for Maaka and Fleras. Indigenous peoples insist on surviving as distinct

nations in ways defined by their own processes of self-determination, but they also wish

to continue participating in the dominant society (p. 13). Therefore, they call for the

recreation of two distinct polities: a settler state and an Indigenous polity. The

participatory inclusion of Indigenous peoples within contemporary settler politics is not

enough, but instead Indigenous peoples must be able to practice their self-determination

apart from the settler state, but still having an equal partnership among all people,

proposing instead a genuine power-sharing arrangement with settler governments (p.

141-142). Maaka and Fleras suggest that a readjustment of colonial-Indigenous relations

requires a paradigm shift toward a "constructive engagement" driven by both parties and resulting in a beneficial and new post-colonial constitutional order (p. 297-298). That is, they argue a full integration of Indigenous peoples is needed to build a sustainable and just constitutional order.

As a solution, Maaka and Fleras call for the construction of a new social contract between the settler state and Indigenous peoples, allowing everyone to move towards peaceful co-existence. But what does this post-colonial social contract look like? Maaka and Fleras offer suggestions on how to achieve this, but fail to adequately define what such an agreement would look like. The proposal for a potential co-existence of settler and Indigenous polities is a highly contested issue, particularly in Canada where Indigenous-Canadian relations remain intrinsically colonial. For example, Maaka and Fleras describe the ongoing rights extinguishment policies through the Comprehensive Treaty Claims (CTC) process in Canada provide Canadian sovereignty as being superior to Indigenous self-determination (p. 225-228). This relationship necessitates that Indigenous peoples become compliant with Canadian laws. Even though Indigenous peoples may gain a form of political recognition, they are still confined by this existing order.

However, as Indigenous peoples are finding themselves continually transformed into subjects of settler governments, as demonstrated by the CTC process, a new social contract would likely also re-emphasize Canada as the dominant party. The politics surrounding Indigeneity is an important issue in the Canadian political order, and is imperative for the on-going right of Indigenous self-determination. For Maaka and Fleras, practices of Indigeneity reinforce Indigenous political autonomy that challenges

settler politics, as Canada maintains an assumption that Crown sovereignty overrides

Indigenous political independence (p. 238). In this regard, the understanding, practice

and political basis of Indigeneity clash with settler ideals of state constitutionalism as an

overriding authority. Indigeneity is constructed as a form of renewal as it defines

Indigenous peoples' worldviews and demonstrates their freedom to practice self-

determination from a culturally rooted place (p. 256). Practices of Indigeneity allow

Indigenous nations to ensure cultural continuity. The notion of co-existence with settler

populations had been advocated among Indigenous peoples since the first treaties with

Canada, with the understanding that we would respect each other's unique forms of self-

government. Placing emphasis of Indigenous peoples' expressions of Indigeneity and

integrating it into settler polity will not remedy this, as it will confine Indigenous peoples

to an existing order that exists under the authority of the state.

Practices of Indigeneity can be utilized as a political framework to challenge and

resist state sovereignty. The use of storied narratives that represent Indigenous peoples'

self-understanding of their social, political, and cultural existence can be used to

challenge and resist state sovereignty. From his work examining state sovereignty claims

in the Arctic, Inuit scholar Gordon Christie (2011) argues that the concept of Indigeneity

is important for the continued existence of Indigenous peoples. For Christie, the

dominant discourse of politics in the Arctic involves a presumption of state sovereignty

over the Arctic (p. 329). This dominant discourse is embedded within the notion that the

nation state carries a universal presumption of authority that "precludes the sensibility of

other ways of thinking and acting," particularly by Indigenous peoples (p. 332).

Christie's primary concern is this assumed authority disregards the cultural ways of life

of the Indigenous inhabitants, whose practices pre-dates the imposed systems of state authority (p. 329). As a form of resistance, Christie proposes an approach that centres Indigeneity in order to counteract such narratives allowing Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories of who they are based in their cultural and political worldviews (p. 337-338). For Christie, Indigenous peoples live in a self-contained cultural normativity where "meaning stems from world creating and world maintaining patterns" (p. 337). He further explains that Indigenous societies commonly share and build collectively generated patterns of thought based upon universal norms and principles reflected within their culture, and maintained by structures and processes of their own (p. 337-338). Narratives from this perspective carry commonalities of meanings within their collectivity that police meaning of social orders that play a large role in the constructing of their social realities (p. 338). Christie affirms that this form Indigeneity is a form of resistance that is both positive and appropriate, as they live in their narrative structures because of their status as separate meaning-generating communities (p. 340). For example, Inuit oral narratives detail how the relationship of their people and the land is predicated on social orders and based on concepts of respect and responsibility (p. 341). These social orders provide alternate stories of proper human-land-animal relations that the larger world can learn from (p. 342). In this fashion, Indigenous peoples possess many narratives about how to live, over which they maintain the authority to tell, retell, modify and reconstruct their own interpretations (ibid).

Indigenous forms of power and authority stem from their social and political narratives, as practices of Indigeneity, to build and preserve worlds of meaning about themselves. Indigenous peoples' participation in state-based processes are not meant to

lead to recognition as a full-fledged nation-state. Instead, they "demand respect as a dynamic meaning generating community, as people who are alive and fundamentally self-determining" (Ibid). Christie suggests that by choosing to resist the sovereignty discourse in the Arctic, Indigenous peoples use narratives that give meaning and shape to their practices of Indigeneity. By asserting these narratives, Indigenous peoples can clearly articulate social orders that maintain their cultural power and governance practices (p. 344). Practices of Indigeneity enable Indigenous peoples to maintain and provide a form of continuity of who they are and how they exercise their governance. This enables them to protect and uphold their collective existence based on their traditional worldviews rooted in their landscapes.

As the settler state's colonial relationship with Indigenous peoples is constituted by government policies, Indigenous communities are left in a position where they are engaging state institutional processes to assert their rights. Most often, such processes are done in a manner and language that is foreign to them and oppositional to their practices of Indigeneity. These processes are demonstrated through the modern day treaty process and self-government negotiations in Canada. In *Finding Dashaa: Self-Government, Social Suffering, and Aboriginal Policy in Canada*, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox (2009) examines Canada's Aboriginal policy and its impacts on self-government negotiations, providing analysis of the negotiations process between Canada and the Dene and Inuit peoples in the Northwest Territories. For Irlbacher-Fox, Aboriginal policy and self government negotiations function as a dysfunction theodicy (p. 31; 108), based on the assumption that the relief of Indigenous peoples' suffering is found within the state's embrace, whose policies serve as a source of healing and redemption. Aboriginal

policy and the state's "gift" of self-government to Indigenous peoples is thus an attempt

to acclimate Indigenous people to modernity, to reconcile Indigenous peoples' claims to

the land that problematize state sovereignty (p. 111). Similar to Maaka and Fleras, a

fundamental redesigned Indigenous-state relationship, is required by Irlbacher-Fox in

order to respect Indigenous peoples' existence and accommodate their practices of

Indigeneity in a more just relationship (p. 1-2).

A key element in *Finding Dashaa* is disentanglement of historical injustices

located in the past and an acknowledgement of social suffering from an ongoing

colonialism that is widely ignored by the settler society, especially during self-

government negotiations (p. 28-29). Canada's vision of Aboriginal self-government

involves the *inclusion* of Indigenous peoples in settler society, where they will

presumably succeed both socially and economically (p. 60). But, is this true Indigenous

self-governance and self-determination? For Irlbacher-Fox, the answer is no. She notes

that negotiations often have a pre-determined outcome, reinforcing state power, which

already has far more financial and legal resources when beginning the negotiations (p.

75), and is capable of using its power to control Indigenous nations after the agreement is

signed (p. 91). Decisions to abide by bureaucratic processes in government negotiations

often leaves Indigenous communities confined to weakened bargaining positions when

making their claims. Indigenous representatives are in a constant uphill battle during the

negotiations, where, "in light of these realities, it is easy to feel so out resourced and over

powered that any attempt at negotiating what communities really want is futile" (p. 75).

Irlbacher-Fox concludes that through her analysis of self-negotiations process for

Indigenous peoples leaves them disempowered by participating within frameworks that

require Indigenous assimilation into Canadian political norms (p. 160). She further

explains that though self-government agreements, Canada consolidates colonial control

over Indigenous peoples in the North, it does not undo injustices of the past and does not

alter the political circumstances facing Indigenous peoples in the present (p. 169).

An examination of Indigenous-state relations can also provide insight into the

important role that Indigeneity plays for Indigenous nations in making claims against the

state. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014), in *Red Skin White Masks*, examines

contemporary Indigenous-settler political relations in Canada. He seeks to challenge the

common perception that the colonial relationship between the state and Indigenous

people can be transformed through the politics of recognition, which is the recognition of

internal self-determination and aboriginal rights by becoming integrated *within* Canadian

polity (p. 2). He argues that such recognition models are based upon a liberal pluralism

that accommodates Indigenous identity claims through renewing political and legal

relationship with the state (p. 3). Coulthard argues that this is problematic for Indigenous

people because "the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to

reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that

Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend"

(ibid). Previous colonial action invested in policies that initiated exclusion and

assimilation of Indigenous peoples, but the state now articulates a more appeasing

process that emphasizes accommodation and reconciliation for Indigenous peoples.

Coulthard argues, the Indigenous-state relationship "has remained colonial to its

foundation" (p. 6) and suggests abandoning state processes that call for recognition.   He

instead calls of a foundationally new form of politics by igniting Indigenous cultural

resurgence, our practices of Indigeneity, is the best option for Indigenous peoples (p. 179).

Coulthard centralizes Dene worldviews of the natural world and claims that dispossession acts as the precursor to Indigenous struggles over land (p. 60). Indigenous struggle over land-based practices in a Dene worldview prioritizes reciprocal relations and obligations and teaches individuals to live in non-dominating and non-exploitive terms (ibid). Coulthard identifies this placed-based foundation as *grounded normativity,* in which "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experimental knowledge that inform and structures our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (p. 13). Grounded normativity serves as a framework to identify Indigenous knowledge in relation to their lands that facilitates a broader understanding of their ways of life and of the interconnectivity that arises from it. This is significant as it was the underlying anti-imperialist argument that Dene people used in making claims against the state during the 1970s and onwards. Importantly, *grounded normativity* is a process that some Dene elders and families still practice in the North.

What is important about Coulthard's work is his focus on Dene struggles for self-determination. He explains significant sites within the political history of the Dene and highlights important events that played a role for Dene to political assert for their self-determination. These events include the bureaucratic formation of the Canadian government in the north (p. 55-56), to the Berger Inquiry on the Mackenzie Gas Pipeline Proposal in 1975 (p. 59), and to the failed Dene-Métis Claim in the 1990s that ushered a wave of Comprehensive Land Claim agreements in the North (p. 75). Coulthard argues

that the outcomes of land claims negotiations benefit the state and have resulted in the

domestication of Indigenous peoples (p. 67). He describes the land claim process over

time transformed the Dene on their positions of their relationship to land and notions of

their self-determination by turning their lands into property. This has significantly

altered their orientation to state government in becoming subject to Canadian laws (p.

78). Coulthard calls for Indigenous nations to look beyond the nation state, noting how,

in the past 40 years of Indigenous participation in Canadian institutions have failed to

secure recognition of territory and self-determination rights and instead have reproduced

power imbalances and injustices that the Dene initially sought to challenge (p. 179).

Coulthard encourages Indigenous people to instead turn away from the rights-based

recognition processes and instead focus on decolonization, gender equality, and

alternative economic and legal practices grounded in the traditional governance principles

of Indigenous nations (ibid).

Practices of Indigeneity are what defines Indigenous peoples' ways of life by

reigniting their *grounded normativity* (Coulthard, 2014, p.13). One of the foremost

challenges that Indigenous peoples face in the contemporary political context is living

their culture free from interference. Living an Indigenous identity *outside* of the state's

authority, the most independent form of practicing Indigeneity, has become increasingly

difficult. For Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005) the very act of being Indigenous

is a major challenge for Indigenous peoples today, as settler colonialism continues to

dominate their ways of life (p. 597). This daily reality means Indigenous peoples face

regular threats to the integrity of their lands, cultures, and political systems by the

dominant society and Canadian governments (p. 599). An example of state control over

Indigenous peoples is the assertion of 'aboriginalism' designed to incorporate Indigenous peoples into the settler body politic (p. 598). For Alfred and Corntassel, aboriginalism is a state construct that attacks the underlying essence of Indigenous identities so that individuals come to identify themselves based on their political and legal relationships with the state, rather than their cultural and social ties to their communities, culture, and homelands (p. 599). The danger of such compartmentalization is that it often leads Indigenous communities to mimic the practices of non-Indigenous institutions and comply to state approved definitions of Indigenous identity (p. 600).

True Indigeneity involves the practice of Indigenous ways of life and the assertion of self-governance based upon their Indigenous knowledge systems and connections to land. As an example of Indigenous incorporation of settler politics related to territorial rights and jurisdiction, Alfred and Corntassel identify the Nisga'a Final Agreement which transferred the land rights of the Nisga'a to the Crown, resulting in the governments of Canada and British Columbia control over the people and their lands (p. 603). The Nisga'a Final Agreement reaffirmed their status as citizens of Canada and relinquished their claim for recognition as a separate political entity. Many federal policies, such as the *Indian Act* are designed to confine Indigenous people to define and exercise their cultural expressions through state institutions, and within the authorities and framework embedded therein (p. 603).

To resist further colonial intrusion into the lives of Indigenous people, Alfred and Corntassel suggest Indigenous nations regenerate their cultural ways of life and re-centre the political and cultural practices of their people. This requires reviving Indigenous conceptions of culture and embodying the practices of Indigeneity. Alfred and Corntassel

call for a 'peoplehood' model that provides a more flexible, dynamic alternative to state

legal and political definitions of identity that interconnects elements of being Indigenous

through five main concepts: a shared history, ceremony, language, land, and relationships

(p. 609-10). A powerful example Alfred and Corntassel uses to embody peoplehood

comes from the words of Apache Scholar Bernadette Adley Santa Maria, "If you do not

sing the songs, if you do not tell the stories and if you do not speak the language, you will

cease to exist as 'Ndee' (Apache)" (p. 609). The current institutional approaches to make

meaningful change in the lives of Indigenous peoples do not challenge the colonial power

structures currently in place, nor do they enable resurgence from a culturally grounded

place (p. 611-12). Instead, they further embed Indigenous peoples within the system that

they originally challenged (ibid). Building a meaningful path to an authentic Indigenous

freedom starts with the transcendence of colonialism on an individual basis and then

establishing strong ties with family, clans, community, and other extensive relationships

that create an Indigenous reality (p. 612). Alfred and Corntassel developed various

pathways that individuals can build toward an Indigenous resurgent movement. This

includes re-connection to ancestral lands, learning one's Indigenous language as a source

of power and understanding, conquering fears from a spiritually- and culturally- charged

place, decolonizing diets to building self –sufficiency with healthier bodies and

communities through the established foodways that sustained our ancestors, and fostering

change "one warrior at a time" by building relationships that embody teachings and

community solidarity toward meaningful human development (p. 613). Many of the

solutions that Alfred and Corntassel point to encourage individuals to embody Indigenous

principals by reconnecting to their ancestral homelands, learning the cultural and political

teachings of their people, and building meaningful relations that make Indigenous communities possible. Alfred and Corntassel state: "being Indigenous means thinking, speaking, and acting with the conscious intent of regenerating one's Indigeneity. Each Indigenous nation has its own way of articulating and asserting self-determination and freedom" (p. 614). Both Alfred and Corntassel assert that the time is now for Indigenous nations to embody the ancestral knowledge and philosophy of their people to make decisions on the well-being of their people and to start using their laws and ways of governing themselves outside of state power and authority (ibid).

What all these scholars have stated in common is the idea that the concept of Indigeneity is integral for the analysis of Indigenous-Canada relations. As some authors argue for the inclusion of Indigeneity within constitutional politics for greater co-existence, others affirm that this form of inclusion will not enable Indigenous peoples to live truly Indigenous lives. They stress the need to regenerate their communities based on their own philosophies and systems of governance. Others believe that igniting Indigeneity will challenge state sovereignty and prevent further colonial interference. What is significant about the arguments about Indigeneity is that they differentiate the forms of governance practiced by the state and by Indigenous peoples. State governance is based upon the constructs of power and authority, while Indigenous forms of governance is based upon notions of collectivity and relationships guided by land-based knowledge. This is the essence surrounding the politics of Indigeneity where it challenges the dominant political order of the settler state. The underlying argument concerning practices of Indigeneity is: how are Indigenous people going to a govern themselves: as citizens of the settler state and or as independent peoples that exist outside

the power and control of the state? This question is fundamental to understand the

politics of Indigeneity and how Indigenous peoples can put this politics into practice.

The Politics of Indigeneity

The politics of Indigeneity is an important issue because it demonstrates the conflicted

relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. The Indigenous-settler

relationship is highly contested, particularly in Canada, where significant political power

resides in the Canadian state. The nation-state perpetuates a sovereignty narrative that

closes off all alternative forms of action, particularly those that seek to circumvent the

state via the international sphere (Christie, 2011, p. 342). The nation-state is built on a

foundation of colonial policies that require the displacement and control Indigenous

peoples, conceptualizing them as subjects of the Crown. This section, then, will examine

the politics of Indigeneity through Indigenous-state relations in different governing

structures, the processes of self-government and land claim agreements, as well as the

role of practices of Indigeneity in cultural resurgence for autonomous Indigenous

nationhood.

Differing Structures of Governance

Different governance frameworks offer insight into the difference between Indigenous

and settler polities, where traditions often clash over understandings of power, authority,

and expressions of Indigeneity. Indigenous political traditions work in very different

ways than western understandings of power and authority. Indigenous peoples live with a

cultural normativity where governance practices are directed by social orders based on

connections to land, respect for all living things, kinship relations, and responsibility

(Christie, 2011, p. 341). Taiaiake Alfred (2006) argues that state sovereignty is an idea

derived from western ideology that solidifies a particular type of power that is

incompatible with Indigenous conceptions of nationhood. Alfred states that

"'sovereignty' implies a set of values and objectives in direct opposition to those found in

Indigenous philosophies" (p. 324) and is an "exclusionary concept rooted in an

adversarial and coercive western notion of power" (p. 325). He also notes a conceptual

difference between Indigenous and western ideals of political power:

> Nowhere is the contrast between Indigenous and (dominant) western traditions
> sharper than in their philosophical approaches to the fundamental issues of power
> and nature. In Indigenous philosophies, power flows from respect for nature and
> the natural order. In the dominant western philosophy, power derives from
> coercion and artifice-in effect, alienation from nature (p. 327).

For Alfred sovereignty is a socially-constructed concept based on a European notion of

coercive power that Indigenous nations should find ideologically incompatible.

Indigenous peoples' worldviews provide a different perspective on sovereignty.

Examining the sovereignty discourse in an Arctic context, Inuit legal scholar Gordon

Christie (2011) is concerned about how the language of sovereignty that presumes state

authority. He considers the role that Indigenous peoples play as peripheral to larger

discussions of state sovereignty. Christie explains that "the five nation states bordering

the Arctic Ocean assert sovereignty over the landmasses, islands, and territorial waters

that border or lie within the ocean region. In doing so they lay before the world claims

that purportedly provide them 'supreme authority' over these territories" (p. 332). Not

only is sovereignty defined as the "supreme authority" over land, the five Arctic states

perceive their own conceptual structures of dominance over top of the Indigenous people

that inhabit the region. For Christie, the sovereignty model is a colonial artifact of the

nation-state. Its paternal nature legitimates its authority through a universal set of rules implied through the sovereignty model (p. 340-341). He argues that this process closes off other ways of seeing the world, including the worldviews generated by the practices of Indigeneity (p. 344). For Indigenous people, it is not about receiving being subsumed by the nation state, it is about acknowledging the form of governance they choose to follow without being confined by other settler ways of being (ibid). However, being self-governing outside the state is challenging for Indigenous peoples who may want to be distinct from state sovereignty. In this light, self-government negotiations and land claims processes evoke the politics of Indigeneity, demonstrating Indigenous peoples' practices of Indigeneity is too often confined, restricted or assimilated by processes embedded within the institutional frameworks of the settler state.

Negotiations with the State

The politics of Indigeneity is evident through the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state within self-government negotiations and comprehensive land claim (CLC) processes. Such processes tend to support Canadian interests, embodying colonial frameworks and bureaucratic constructs extending paternalistic treatment of Indigenous peoples (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, p. 75). The late Gwich'in leader Robert Arthur Alexie (1997) states that the purpose of the CLC process is to reach a negotiated settlement between Canada and an Indigenous nation in order to clarify Indigenous specific land rights and to clarify the jurisdiction over resources (p. 6). In doing so, negotiations are conducted to identify the lands in question, including rights and title that have not been dealt with in regards to treaty (ibid). From his work analyzing Yukon Land Claim

processes, Paul Nadasdy (2003) states that Indigenous peoples engaging within Land

Claim negotiations need to translate their relationship to lands into the western legal

language of property ownership rendering such processes "incompatible with some core

First Nations beliefs and practices regarding the land and their relationship to it" (p. 223).

Prior to self-government negotiations it is assumed that Indigenous peoples are

subordinate to Canada without their own jurisdictional authority. Maaka and Fleras

(2005) state that when participating in CLC process, Canada only allows for the

relinquishment of Aboriginal rights and title to the lands in question (p. 255), and this

triggers extinguishment upon the conclusion of such a claim (p. 228). Once a land claim

agreement is reached, it *may* provide Indigenous peoples with title over lands, financial

compensation, cash royalties from non-renewable resources, participation within

environmental and wildlife management, wildlife harvesting rights, and self-government

framework agreements (Alexie, 1997, p. 6). Robert Arthur Alexie states that the

agreements strive to insure the Indigenous group "obtain[s] lasting protection for

traditional land-based interests and secure rights and benefits in charting their own socio-

economic development" (ibid). The negotiation process is guided by a set of federal

policies and initiated by timelines that is then determined acceptable by Aboriginal

Affairs and Northern Development (formerly Indian Affairs) for further negotiations

(ibid; Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, p. 18).

Once the CLC negotiations are approved, frameworks of self-government can

then be pursued upon federal approval. Within this process, Indigenous peoples can only

articulate their claims as a right to self-government within Canada, not autonomy (Maaka

& Fleras, 2005, p. 98). For self-government to be initiated, Indigenous nations are

subject to a number of conditions by the federal government, including how future land

claim governments must operate within the Canadian federal system, in harmony with

other levels of governments (provincial or territorial), be consistent with Canadian

Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and further enhance the participation of Indigenous

peoples in Canadian society (p. 232). In examining self-government negotiations in the

North between the Dene, Inuit, and Canada, Irlbacher-Fox (2009) highlights how

negotiations are thus an obstacle for Indigenous self-determination:

> negotiations are weighted in favour of Canada, which determines the criteria for
> accepting claims, the policy parameters restricting subjects for discussion, and the
> participating funding available to Indigenous peoples. In light of these realities, it
> is easy to feel, as representative of Indigenous governments, so out-resourced and
> overpowered that any attempt at negotiating what communities really want is
> futile. Instead, it feels as though negotiations are really a forum for governments
> to consult (p. 75).

In a similar vein, Paul Nadasdy (2003) describes how First Nations in the Yukon often

find themselves having to mirror the state's bureaucratic political systems in order to deal

with the contemporary nation–to-nation relationship in land claims and self-government

agreements. This usually requires the First Nation to abandon their day-to-day land-

based ways of life in order to uphold such a relationship (p. 2-3).

The Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim (GCLCA) provides insight to the

politics of Indigeneity that exists between the Gwich'in and Canada (Government of

Canada Website, 2015). The Gwich'in signed Treaty 11 on July 28, 1921. According to

those present, it was considered a peace treaty with no intention to surrendering title to

Dene lands (Alexie, 1997, p. 4). Unfulfilled treaty obligations created a desire among

Gwich'in to pursue negotiations within the contemporary land claims process (ibid). As

previously mentioned, the GCLCA was signed on April 22, 1992 with the Government of

Northwest Territories (GNWT) and the Government of Canada. The GCLCA provided

the Gwich'in with a $75 million capital transfer over a fifteen-year period, annual royalty

payments, and fee simple title to 9,258 square miles of combined subsurface and surface

lands in the NWT and Yukon (Alexie, p. 6-7). The GCLCA was widely supported,

resulting in 94% of eligible Gwich'in voters voting in favour of the land claim in 1992.

Under GCLCA, the Gwich'in would be provided rights and ownership of land and

resources in their defined land claim area and in exchange extinguished their rights as

outlined in Treaty 11 to water and lands in Canada (Gwich'in Tribal Council, 2000, p. 2).

The Gwich'in land claim is based upon the notion that the Gwich'in have traditionally

used and occupied lands in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon since time

immemorial (Alexie, 1997, p. 3). However, the government of Canada has never

accepted the reality that the Gwich'in actually own the land they have controlled for

millennia, only that they *occupied* it (ibid).

There are several important statements in the general provisions of the GCLCA

that allows state agencies to influence the Gwich'in. The Gwich'in become categorized

as Canadian citizens and supposedly give up their ability to govern themselves outside of

Canada. The general provisions state: the Gwich'in Land Claim is an agreement that is

legally protected under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*; it does not remove the

constitutional rights of the Gwich'in, as Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, the Gwich'in

retain their rights as Canadian citizens and participation within government programs,

and the *Indian Act* is not affected by the new rights as identified within the Gwich'in

Land Claim (Gwich'in Tribal Council, 2000, p. 2). Importantly, the Gwich'in gave up

their Treaty 11 rights to lands and waters in exchange for the rights identified within the

Gwich'in Land Claim (ibid). The Gwich'in Land Claim serves as an example of how the Indigenous-state relationship undermines Gwich'in assertions of their Indigeneity. They were compelled to give up their cultural and land rights from Treaty 11 and to embody western governments to replace their traditional methods of governance already in place. Nadasdy (2003) states that the translations of Indigenous peoples worldviews to be subsumed into the settler polity through the language of property is the main goal of modern day land claims (p. 233). Adding to this argument, Dene Scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) defines the land claim process as the "politics of recognition" which strives to reconcile Indigenous peoples' notions of nationhood within the settler polity that maintains its colonial framework to further "dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority" (p. 151). Coulthard explains Indigenous people have to reorient their definitions of self-determination to be better accommodating to the state including how they conceptualize their lands, altering a relationship based on respect and dependence to viewing land as a resource of economic gain (p. 78). As this section demonstrates, the dominating nature of negotiations and presume authority of the Canadian state. The Gwich'in have become mere citizens of the state and "given" the authority by Canada to be self-governing. Many Gwich'in rights have been adverted and their lives continue to be shaped by the *Indian Act*. For Indigenous scholars like Coulthard, Alfred, and Corntassel this is not true Indigenous self-determination as Indigenous peoples are confined within the constructs of the state, mirroring the governments of their oppressors.

The Importance of Practices of Indigeneity

Even though Indigenous peoples may achieve some political recognition and authority

from land claim processes, they experience limited amount of freedom compared to what

their ancestors had prior to the assertion of settler sovereignty (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, p. 6;

Coulthard, 2014, p.78). Alfred (2006) stresses that Indigenous governments willing to

engage in this process end up achieving "only limited forms of autonomy, not

independence" (p. 324). Indigenous people who choose to engage the state political and

legal landscape for specific ends need to be careful, as this landscape is entirely

predicated on the presumed superiority of state sovereignty (Christie, 2011, p. 335;

Coulthard, 2014, p.179), and reproduces the same colonial framework designed to

assimilate Indigenous peoples into the settler polity (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, p. 160). It also

enables Indigenous peoples to exploit their own lands for financial gain under the guise

of economic development (Coulthard, 2014, p. 78). Canadian narratives largely deny

other possible ways of thinking of Indigenous peoples as existing outside of state

authority, situating Indigenous peoples in an existing framework that normalizes colonial

subversion of Indigenous political independence (Christie, 2011; p. 332; Alfred &

Corntassel, 2005, p. 598-599), a regime of Aboriginal rights comprised of only those that

the state is willing to recognize (Coulthard, 2014, p.151), and notions of self-governance

situated firmly within the Canadian constitutional order (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, p.60).

Canada has led Indigenous peoples down a path that requires Indigenous

communities to reassess the important role that practices of Indigeneity play in

resurrecting forms of Indigenous existences marginalized by colonial projects. Coulthard

(2014) argues that moving away from rights-based discourses and recognition politics

toward more culturally grounded resurgent practices reaffirms Indigenous legal and

political traditions and the continuity of Indigenous nations (p. 179). In this same light,

Alfred and Corntassel suggest that confined expressions of Indigeneity within a Canadian

constitutional framework are not the Indigenous way of being and thinking in relation to

their cultural and spiritual traditions. For them, being Indigenous is living an authentic

life that revives philosophical traditions, language and practices in accordance with

ancient Indigenous laws and institutions (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 614). This means

Indigenous peoples living by their own social orders premised on their philosophies and

living their social and cultural living traditions and practices guided by their traditional

knowledge. Practices of Indigeneity are vital in affirming continuity of Indigenous

governance based on social orders embedded within Indigenous physical and cultural

landscapes.

Indigeneity and Governance

Moose Hide Tanning as Practices of Indigeneity

Practices of Indigeneity vary from place to place but here I define them as *the acts of*

Indigenous peoples practicing their social and cultural traditions stemming from their

land-based cultures. An example of Indigeneity that is practiced among the Dene of the

Northwest Territories is moose hide tanning. A necessary skill, the traditional process of

moose hide tanning has been central to Dene culture for thousands of years and its

practice reinforces collective responsibility and fosters relationships among the people.

Irlbacher-Fox (2009) provides elaborate depictions of how moose hide tanning is central

to understanding Dene culture and governance. She writes: "tanning is probably one of

the most empowering and positive things a person can do-not only because it is a

tradition or results in a 'product.' Tanning is about collective cooperation, responsibility,

tenacity, self-reliance, commitment, and accomplishment requiring multiple and

specifically Dene knowledges" (p. 38). For Irlbacher-Fox, the practice of moose hide

tanning is a vital cultural reference point in practicing Dene self-governance and reviving

self-determination. This practice exists outside of state control, involves a wide array of

Indigenous community members with unique skills, and requires mobilization and

retention of an extensive network of traditional knowledge (p. 38-39). It is thus,

representative of practices of Indigeneity. The process of moose hide tanning requires a

far-reaching community of hunters, tanners, knowledge holders, and learners who

promotes respect, culturally-specific learning, and empowers people to experience land-

based knowledge that fosters physical and emotional wellbeing (p. 43). Hide tanning is

an example of a cultural land base practice that is deeply spiritual and enables one to

become closely connected to the land. It also mobilizes many traditional governance

practices of Dene people. As Irlbacher-Fox describes it, "it is about configuring personal

strength and individual intuitive to the benefit of the collective" (p. 38). As a result,

moose hide tanning relies upon a central tenet of the traditional governance of Dene

people. Moose hide tanning, as a practice of Indigeneity, is a practice that embodies

Dene self-governance as it brings people together to work collectively to produce a

positive outcome that does not require or involve the state (p. 44). In short, then, it is an

act of self-governance manifested as a practice of Indigeneity.

Practices of Indigeneity can be seen as threatening to the established order, for it

can be seen as an act against cultural 'modernization' serving as an alternative to state-

based self-government. Irlbacher-Fox herself experiences how moose hide tanning can

be constructed as a political act of resurgence to the state, something beyond a cultural

practice. She notes that the skill of tanning can be seen as a "complex gift exchange network evolving beyond kin groups; power relations and hierarchies abound; and tanning itself might be perceived as a political act, a form of resistance, or a form of social control" (p. 43). Practices of Indigeneity serve as a form of resurgence to re-orient communities away from colonial regimes and towards community interdependence, these practices can alter the state's power, control, and domination of Indigenous communities. A clear example of this is how moose hide tanning fosters a sense of collectivity among people working together within their cultural settings and by being out on the land together. It brings together hunters, elders, knowledge holders, caregivers, young and old alike for a common outcome. This practice is a form of governance outside the reach of colonialism. Colonialism is a form of assimilation that acts against Indigenous worldviews, thus their practices of being Indigenous - their Indigeneity. Irlbacher-Fox notes that,

> too often being Indigenous is viewed as forms of resistance-against the state, mainstream society, western values. Too seldom Indigeneity is viewed as people being—culturally, entirely, being themselves, whether engaging in ceremonies, seeking recognition of their existence, or asserting their rights. In this sense, tanning embodies the principals of Indigenous resurgence: people simply being culturally themselves toward a positive outcome, without reference to the state or any negative forces (p. 44).

Being able to practice cultural ways of life is central to Indigenous community survival and well-being, for it defines their existence and enables Indigenous peoples to re-orient themselves to find their cultural, spiritual, and physical place in the world. The key to Indigenous survival cannot be found in settler state-based constitutional regimes, but in the freedom of cultural practices embedded in ancestral knowledge and land-based connection. Practices of Indigeneity ensure the freedom of Indigenous existence and are

instrumental for decolonization. Therefore, Indigeneity is one of the crucial prospects for

Indigenous communities to free themselves from the restraints of settler governments.

Part of this understanding stems from the critical distinction that freedom through

practices of Indigeneity and freedoms through the state are oppositional. As Indigenous

scholars like Alfred, Corntassel, and Coulthard argue self-determination can be achieved

outside the constructs of the nation-state when defined by Indigenous communities on

their own terms. Indigenous communities already practice significant autonomy, as they

are distinct from Canada's settler society. Practices of Indigeneity, like moose hide

tanning, can provide an alternative to state sovereignty fostering cultural self-

determination by Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous peoples' own views of what

it means to be self-governing peoples. It is of critical importance to the struggle against

colonialism and for cultural and political recognition of the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Indigeneity

should not be understood *only* as a tool that exists in relation to the state, but that it

should also be understood as the force that defines, maintains, and reproduces the Teetł'it

Gwich'in as a self-governing people. Indigeneity demonstrates that a land-based reality

can be constructed and practiced outside the limits of the settler state's sovereignty

model. That is, the ability to live outside of the supreme law of the land and to be outside

of the confines of state sovereignty.

Conclusion

Practices of Indigeneity are the land-based activities foundational to what it means to be

Indigenous. These practices affirm the political, cultural, spiritual and social freedoms of

Indigenous peoples. Indigeneity varies regionally, but commonly shares a set of actions

and ideals that define and speak to the unique cultures of Indigenous nations. The concept

of Indigeneity is not just a social construct used to assert the political actions in defining

Indigenous rights, but it is a way of being that enables Indigenous communities to survive

in an world imposed onto them by powerful outsiders. The politicization of practices of

Indigeneity is essential because it enables a reassertion of Indigenous forms of autonomy

and governance. In essence, Indigeneity challenges the dominant political systems that

often limit other ways of being within the nation-state context. Practices of Indigeneity

provide many forms of resurgence based upon actions through land-based practices and

teachings, asserting cultural continuity for Indigenous peoples. While state sovereignty

and authority limits the imagination and creativity of other forms of governance,

practices of Indigeneity promote freedom of Indigenous peoples distinct from state power

and authority.

The presumed power held by Canada over Indigenous peoples makes the

compelling claim for Indigeneity even more vital for Indigenous nations to assert their

self-governance from a culturally rooted place. Indigenous peoples are confined within

Canada's constitutional regime, which continually attempts to transform them into

unproblematic Canadian citizens. The politics surrounding Indigeneity are crucial in

challenging the contemporary Canadian political order and in achieving self-

determination for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous scholars offer us stark reminders of the

significance of cultural revitalization in building stronger Indigenous communities.

Practices of Indigeneity challenge the authority and power of the state by challenging its

own preferred system of governance based on Indigenous principles, practices, and

worldviews.

The next chapter is the first of two chapters on Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity, which reveal the worldview that supports Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance, in the place of the Canadian constitutional order, which seeks to keep them in the political fold. It presents the narratives and voices of Teetł'it Gwich'in elders on how the Canadian government had sought to undermine their practices of Indigeneity via policies designed to assimilate them into the settler society. Their Indigeneity, they argue, is essential to their connection to land that provides a fundamental web of relations cementing their social and cultural wellbeing.

Chapter Two: The Impact of Canadian Policy on the Teetł'it Gwich'in

Introduction

Practices of Indigeneity are important for Indigenous peoples in defining their status and self-determination outside of state authority. As Indigenous scholars, like Coulthard, Alfred and Corntassel demonstrate, reigniting practices of Indigeneity are vital for Indigenous peoples to assert their self-determination rooted in social, spiritual, and cultural landscapes. However, Indigeneity also unveils the contentious relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and the state. Understood as the politics of Indigeneity, Indigenous peoples are impacted by a state that sought to control, assimilate, and eradicate Indigenous peoples' connections to their lands and culture.

This chapter focuses on Teetł'it Gwich'in understandings of how the government of Canada's assimilatory policies impacted their connection to lands, and the ability to practice their cultural traditions rooted in Teetł'it Gwich'in landscapes. These elders' stories describe the struggles they faced due to Canada's political control over their homeland, ostensibly to "develop" Indigenous peoples by fostering natural resource development in the North. These elders witnessed a dramatic change in their lifetimes[4], transitioning from a land-based subsistence culture to a world of increasingly sedentary, wage-based economies, and economic "modernization." These changes have deeply impacted the social fabric and traditional economic culture among the Gwich'in people. This chapter explores three broad cultural and political changes that have affected the Teetł'it Gwich'in over the course of these elders' lifetimes:

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[4] The age of the elder participants ranged between 68 to 80 plus years. They were born as early as the 1930s into the late 1940s.

1. Displacement from the land and dependency-creation through public housing projects, negatively impacting land-based ways of life;

2. Cultural dislocation and severed family and land base connections by the residential school experience;

3. Colonial interference in traditional Teetł'it Gwich'in governance practices.

Woven together by overlapping narratives, the stories shared by Teetł'it Gwich'in elders show how their lives were (and are) directly affected by the introduction of social housing, residential school policy, and changing leadership structures under the guise of the *Indian Act* in Teetł'it Zheh. The elders understand these policies as a transparent assimilation process designed to bring Teetł'it Gwich'in into the institutions of Canadian settler society. Their life experience demonstrates that these policy initiatives do not benefit Gwich'in self-governance aspirations as defined by traditional social and cultural traditions. Fundamental to the goal of developing natural resources in the North, the Canadian government attempted to bring Indigenous peoples under its control by imposing a Chief and Council system under the *Indian Act* that is not of their own traditions, to displace Northern populations off the land by way of providing social housing and to modernize and educate through the residential school system[5].

To better appreciate the role of federal policy in the lives of Teetł'it Gwich'in, this chapter identifies the impact of what the elders referred to as "whiteman ways" or the federal policies designed to "modernize" Gwich'in (Robert Alexie Sr., Personal Interview, October 8, 2012; Sarah Jerome, Personal Interview, October 6, 2012), and the long-term impacts of these policies. This chapter will explore the three aforementioned

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[5] The stories shared by the elders overlap in the description of timelines. Generally, the period that such federal policies that I focused on in this context occurs post Treaty 11 signing in 1921, residential school period commencing in mid 1940s, and up to the 1970s with social housing influence in Teetł'it Zheh.

policies in detail. First, by examining the impact of social housing in Fort McPherson

commencing in the 1950s onward, and its domesticating impact on Teetł'it Gwich'in

families. Next, it analyzes the long-term impacts of residential school policy[6] on

traditional knowledge transmission and its role in uprooting subsequent generations of

Gwich'in from the land. Finally, the chapter will explore how federal interference in

traditional Gwich'in self-governance was made possible by the importation of the *Indian*

Act Chief and Council system post 1921 Treaty 11 signing, and it will also identify how

elders propose to return to a more traditional form of leadership.

The Whiteman Ways: Social Housing Versus Life On The Land

Over the past century, the Arctic has witnessed significant changes to its physical and

cultural landscape. Following the Second World War, Indigenous peoples in the North

were influenced by western ideas introduced through various federal policies designed to

administer Indigenous peoples (Christie, 2011, p. 331; Christensen, 2011, p. 69). Perhaps

the most significant policy affecting Indigenous lives was the implementation of a social

housing policy in the North. With the introduction of housing norms foreign to

Gwich'in, these new buildings altered the way in which Teetł'it Gwich'in engaged with

space and this policy subtly transformed how Gwich'in organized themselves

geographically (Christensen, 2011, p. 70). In 1953, the Canadian government developed a

new strategy to administer the North with the creation of the Department of Northern

Affairs and Natural Resources (ibid). This new agency accompanied a major policy shift

in the federal government's approach to managing the largely Indigenous northern

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[6] According to elder testimony, they left their families as earliest as in the mid 1940s to attend Residential School in Aklavik, NWT.

population. The new department sought to centralize the people by establishing new permanent settlements and populating them with the formerly mobile Indigenous population. These efforts claimed to strategically "modernize" the North in order to access many previously inaccessible, yet resource-rich territories populated almost exclusively by Indigenous peoples. Whatever the initial intent, this policy shift ultimately fostered a new kind of social dependency in the North, making formerly independent people increasingly reliant on welfare and other federal programs to survive (Wishart & Loovers, 2013, p. 57; Berger, 1977, p. 85; Christie, 2011, p. 331). Julia Christensen (2011) argues that this "new federal approach to northern development and administration meant a dramatic shift from the deliberate and strategic *discouragement* of 'dependency' to the active *encouragement* of the centralization of Aboriginal people into settlements" (p. 70, emphasis in original). This centralization was a stepping-stone for the Canadian government to integrate Indigenous peoples further into an emerging wage-labour economy as well as Canadian society in general (Bone, 2003). The federal government saw these initiatives as a way of extending the establishment of settlements and thus more firmly asserting Canadian control of the North (ibid). Over the long term, the policies also severed northern Indigenous peoples' sense of connection to place and altered their ways of life in order to introduce resource exploitation and wage-labour dependency in the North.

The introduction of government housing policy in the North was a key element in the federal modernization initiative that undermined Teetł'it Gwich'in land use, shifting their Indigenous ways of life away from their land-based activities, towards permanent sedentary living and wage-labour in communities. According to Adele Perry (2003),

government-housing programs proved to be a significant site of conflict in the colonial

encounter between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state. She argues that this kind

of social housing acts as a "vehicle through which the reorganization of First Nation

society was imagined, attempted, resisted, and ultimately refashioned" (p. 588). This

colonial encounter proposed a new social living arrangement that sought to reorder what

the Canadian society saw as the 'backwardness' of Indigenous ways of life into a more

'civilized' European forms (p. 604). Perry suggests that housing represents a clash over

space, a form of assimilation to "appropriate" gender roles, as well as a transformation of

economic and settlement patterns within Indigenous societies. Housing is therefore an

important issue that demonstrates the impact of Canada's colonial policies on Indigenous

peoples in the North.

On the surface, the federal government's rationale for social housing programs

was to ease the transition for a once-nomadic people to life in a sedentary community on

a full-time basis and to participate within the emerging capitalist economy. However,

housing is merely one element of early federal policy that progressively induced the

people off the land to become dependent on a new system of government. This new

dependency created a reliance on a system that provided all the basic needs to live in the

community, but expecting the transition to a much different lifestyle (Christensen, 2011,

p. 74-75). This includes residing in permanent homes and living a more sedentary

lifestyle. The implementation of such a policy was instrumental for the state to gain

control of much of the resources in the North, and by attempting to "modernize" the

Teetł'it Gwich'in people the federal government was also partially successful in

removing them from the land. The elders also shared this understanding, knowing that the

introduction of housing as northern social policy developed by the Canadian government was very instrumental in severing Teetł'it Gwich'in cultural connections to lands and altering their ways of life.

Housing as Removal from the Land

The elders that I interviewed are from a generation that witnessed the dramatic shift from life on the land with their families, to life in a more permanent, but not entirely sedentary settlement (Robert Alexie Sr., Personal Interview, October 8, 2012; Bertha Francis, Personal Interview, September 27, 2012). When asked about their thoughts on early Teetł'it Gwich'in relations with the federal government, the common response was that the introduction of policies, such as government housing (commonly known today as low-income housing) and residential school, had profoundly negative effects among the people. Specifically, housing created a significant cultural shift in the community, causing many to move from their bush camps to a more permanent sedentary life in the community commencing approximately in the 1950s, gradually increasing over the years. Prior to moving into the settlement, Gwich'in families did not stay in one place but would travel throughout their traditional territories to hunt and harvest resources off the land depending on the season (Fafard & Kritsch, 2005, p. 6). For instance, Teetł'it Gwich'in would fish along the Peel River and its lower tributaries during the summer months then relocate to the mountains in the upper watershed in the fall season and throughout the winter to harvest both large and small game (ibid). As early as the 1920s, Teetł'it Gwich'in people had built cabins and lived seasonally in the trading posts to have access to trade resources (Fafard & Kritsch, p. 30*)*. As previously mentioned, it was not until

after the Second World War (1953) that the federal government shifted its focus to one of

centralization that would dramatically focus on populating settlements across the north

(Christensen, 2011, p.70). This, as witnessed by the elders I interviewed, was a period

where housing in Fort McPherson was "given" freely by the federal government.

According to the elders, they witnessed a generation of people become reliant on

the government as a means of support rather than on a traditional way of life out on the

land (Robert Alexie Sr., Personal Interview, October 8, 2012; Bertha Francis, Personal

Interview, September 27, 2012; Elizabeth Colin, Personal Interview, September 30,

2012). Wishart and Loovers (2013) argue that amongst many other issues, a major

tension with the new settlement houses was that the Teetł'it Gwich'in were now living in

homes that, for the first time in their history, they did not design and build themselves. In

response, many Teetł'it Gwich'in began building their own cabins near the settlement as

a way to continue their independent way of living (p. 58). For the elders, the

government's intention to remove Teetł'it Gwich'in from the land and move them into

the community of Fort McPherson was both clear and an obvious component for

economic reorganization in the North. Elder Bertha Francis, for instance, remembers a

federal incentive to attract Teetł'it Gwich'in to the settlement at Fort McPherson when a

day school was first built in the 1940s. New government housing was built for the

families who were planning to stay in the settlement year round while their children

attended the school there. Bertha remembers that,

> once they put a school in here and the families start coming in. The government
> brought houses in here and said we'll give the woman houses so that their kids
> could go to school and men could stay out there and trap. That did not happen.
> They brought those houses in. Before that our people used to haul wood,
> ice…they had to get everything for themselves. Now, with all this housing they
> give you, you just press buttons and there is no real work to do. Water is ready,

your house is heated ready, what is there for young people to do? (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

With so-called modern conveniences, the elders saw that Teetł'it Gwich'in, particularly the younger generation, ceased to be as active out on the land as they used to be. These activities were considered an important component for maintaining the physical, spiritual, economic, and political connection to lands that ensured the health and well being of the people. This lifestyle is important for Teetł'it Gwich'in to be self-governing and independent from outside authority. Since government housing was a key component in a policy that sought to reorder Indigenous ways of life (Perry, 2003, p. 604), this erosion of land-based and independent self-government eroded Teetł'it Gwich'in freedom, and opened up the possibility of being dependent on outsiders.

As people transitioned from living on the land as a basis of survival to a new life encouraged by the Canadian government between the 1950s-1970s, they continued to practice subsistence living, but doing so increasingly on a seasonal basis. Housing was introduced as an outside policy and implemented by constant regulations controlled by the federal government (Wishart & Loovers, 2013, p. 61). Many Teetł'it Gwich'in lost the independence that was made possible by life on the land, and the ability to provide for themselves and their families, instead becoming accustomed to sedentary life. Wishart and Loovers (2013) note that construction and designs of prefabricated houses ignored social and cultural elements most important to the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Elements such as one's relation to land, the use of land, harvesting of materials for cabins or shelters, traditional knowledge use of lands, collective relationship to building, creativity and use of space (p. 61).

Many elders saw the impact of the housing program and how it changed the people and the practice of their culture. Over time, the people became accustomed to, as elder Robert Alexie Sr.[7] describes, being "tied down" and "spoiled" by the introduction of government housing:

> Today is a big difference that soon as the government came in it just tied the people down…I remember in 1950-52[8] when government came in…build these houses and [say] 'Here, house here for you' (Personal Interview, October 8, 2012).

Robert went on to say:

> forty years that the peoples growing up there in that house [the] housing corporation give them, kids growing up they have nothing to do…I blame the government for doing this, just spoil the peoples. I don't know how they can cure that but they [government] should have…never came in with housing. That's the biggest mistake that the government made to the Gwich'in peoples of McPherson. Its not only just McPherson, its all over…some of us are still trying hard. We live in McPherson but prefer out on the land more. Try to get out but a lot of my people can't make it because they are getting too old now (ibid).

Robert's reflection on people becoming "spoiled" provides insight on how important keeping one's connection to land by being culturally rooted and physically active is to the continuity of Teetł'it Gwich'in Indigeneity, especially for young people trying to find their way in a changing world. The "tying down" process is what Robert sees as an inability for people to choose to live off the land; they are now unable to choose this option because they are not capable of doing it. Because of the inability of people to practice land-based subsistence they have become dependent on an externally imposed system. When one does not go out on the land, the transmission of traditional skills and teachings are halted and eventually lost, especially among the youth. This altered Teetł'it

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[7] Robert is my paternal Grandfather who adopted and raised me as his own daughter.

[8] Robert is likely referring to the creation of the new federal Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources formed in 1953 to administer the North. Its aim was to centralize the people by providing incentives (social housing, ration programs, social assistance, etc) to further populate the settlements with Indigenous people (Christensen, 2011, p.70).

Gwich'in independence and eroded the use of their lands, including their self-governance

and cultural well-being.

Loss of Culture

The influence of federal housing policies has led to immense challenges for the Teetł'it

Gwich'in. As people were removed from the land, the practice and transmission of

traditional knowledge from land use declined. According to an elder's stories, the past

sixty years has created profound intergenerational effects on the Teetł'it Gwich'in that

has seen a reduction in the individual connection to culture, people, families, and the

land. One of the concerns that the elders raise is the decrease in the number of Teetł'it

Gwich'in going out on the land practicing their culture. This further contributes to the

lack of use of their traditional knowledge and land use for physical and spiritual well-

being that is integral to the survival of Teetł'it Gwich'in culture. For elder Robert Alexie

Sr., one of the major issues is how federal housing policies normalized sedentary life

among Teetł'it Gwich'in:

> In the olden days till now, the big difference is people don't get out. Don't get out
> on the land and never mind the government say 'you don't go out on the land
> anyway' and you can go and say [to them] 'you made them stay in town…You
> gave them houses and you made them stay put in town'. And there's day
> school…the kids have to go to school. So you put everything down on the people.
> They have to stay in town (Personal Interview, October 8, 2012).

Robert sees the affects of Teetł'it Gwich'in becoming more dependent on the government

to meet their needs and not rely on the land as a basis for their cultural, physical, and

spiritual subsistence. For Robert, then, social housing, as a federal policy, was an

important factor in the separation of Teetł'it Gwich'in from the land in order for the

federal government to gain access to the resources in the Gwich'in homeland.

With the loss of traditional knowledge many people do not have the skill-set to go out on the land today. Elder Elizabeth Colin raises important concerns about the lack of continuity of land-base practices among Teetł'it Gwich'in:

> I see more peoples staying in McPherson now than out on the land. That time when we used to stay out on the land there was no skidoo, just dog team. So they had dogs, sled, everything, harness. To go out on the land with tents, stove. Now all that is gone. The sleds are gone, the dogs are gone, and most people who had everything, nothing, and it's hard for them to go back out on the land…And like some people don't have any place to go to out of the community and that's where they are just stuck in McPherson. No way of going out. And I think that is the big change. Lot of them can't go out and a lot of kids don't know bush life now (Personal Interview, September 30, 2012).

For Elizabeth there is an obvious age variation of people who spend significant time out on the land and those who spend most of their time in the community. As Teetł'it Gwich'in became more dependent on community living away from land-based activities, elders are concerned that most individuals no longer possess the knowledge, teachings and skills necessary to go on the land and are therefore losing their connection to it. Living a land-based lifestyle is a process where Teetł'it Gwich'in need to own tools and necessary equipment to make it viable. Owning the resources necessary to live out on the land is difficult for many Teetł'it Gwich'in to acquire, as many have not been able to learn the land-based skills to do so due to a generational knowledge gap in the community. This means that the younger generation does not always have the opportunity to see the land and interact with it, in a way that was normal for their parents or grandparents. They either do not have the economic means to purchase the necessary equipment to live on the land or they do not have the traditional knowledge required due to living in Teetł'it Zheh year-round.

With the effects of cultural loss among the people, the influence of modern technology is apparent in the way the elders view the changes to their community. Being on the land and speaking your language is crucial for the culture to be passed on to the next generation. For elder Mary Effie Snowshoe, the changes she is witnessing is alarming and saddens her to know that many of her people are not being traditionally active as they once were:

> We are losing our language now. Hardly any young people can speak the language. There's very few that still talk my language too. They understand me but they won't speak back to me in my native language…I am really sorry to say this but its so sad to see this that we are losing our culture…You don't see people out there doing these things anymore because big change now. Big change and it's sad (Personal Interview, October 3, 2012).

This cultural loss is a significant concern for the elders and especially since the cultural changes they are witnessing are occurring at a fast pace. With the proposal of increased industrial activity posing to change the face of the North, Indigenous peoples, like the Teetl'it Gwich'in, are faced with substantial cultural loss and decreased land use among their people. Overall, the elders are concerned about how changing relationships with the land are changing the way Teetł'it Gwich'in understand the centrality of the land to their identity. If traditional values are no longer being transmitted through land-based practices, how will the Teetł'it Gwich'in effectively maintain their land-base, and through it, their way of life?

Community Living and A Life Out On The Land
Living permanently in Teetł'it Zheh demanded significant changes to traditional Gwich'in lifestyle, creating many challenges for the people, particularly the elders. Over the years, some built their own cabins and homes outside the settlement and lived there

on a semi-permanent basis. Wishart and Loovers (2013) describe cabin building as a form

of resistance to 'imposed landscapes' (p. 67) in this case to prefabricated government

housing, and many Gwich'in built cabins as a way to continue living on the land, but also

to demonstrate a continual presence of Gwich'in land usage within their own territory (p.

62). Self-built Gwich'in cabins "act as anchors in telling of Gwich'in history…[it is also]

an ongoing participant in Gwich'in lives today" (ibid). The elders note how life on the

land is a much different way of life than life that is constructed in the community.

Wishart and Loovers argue that "some within the community of Fort McPherson have

made the decision to construct new homes out of logs that have been hunted themselves

while out on the land, undertaking activities they consider to be continuous with those of

their ancestors and that are being consistent with the local understanding of the proper

way of being" (p. 66-67). All the elders stated that they preferred life out on the land, and

they felt life in the community was too confined by modern conveniences and that

Gwich'in culture is reliant upon life on the land. For one to be independent on the land is

a significant part of Gwich'in self-governance. For elder Elizabeth Colin, living at her

cabin outside the settlement provides more security and independence through self-

reliance:

> In a lot of ways, I see that they the government, in my own words, is taking our
> power away from us. Like out here [out on the land], we can do what we want …
> its like here we live free. No bills to pay, but in the community there is all kinds
> of bills you have to pay too. Like there is water bill, oil bill, power bill, phone,
> cable, look at all that! But out here, we're *our* self. You know, no bills (Personal
> Interview, September 30, 2012).

Elizabeth also describes how living in the community creates a different way of life than

the traditional Teetł'it Gwich'in culture of land-based living:

> It really changed us in the community. Like we have to go live *their* way...[the government] giving us house with electricity and furnace, all that, water, we have washers and all that we can't do without. But we could do without [them] here on the land (Ibid).

As community living provides the comforts of modern technology, it also creates a dependency on these conveniences. As Elizabeth points out, living independently and practicing one's Indigeneity allows Teetł'it Gwich'in to be self-sufficient and self-reliant, something that is vital to Gwich'in self-governance.

New technologies have eased the demands of living-full time out on the land, which some elders felt means less than the physical work necessary for being on the land. Like Robert's insight of people becoming detached and unable to see the importance of life on the land, others see the richness and healthy living vital to the continuance of physical health. For Elizabeth, life in the community removes the responsibility for one to do physical work on the land that keeps a person independent but also physically healthy. It makes them spiritually strong. She describes life in town with technology versus the physical and spiritually healthy life on the land:

> When I am in McPherson I hardly do anything, like there's TV that I like to watch … and I like to read, which find me on the couch. I really don't do anything. There's a washer there and I just put clothes in it, you know. I don't have to do it by hand…Everything is done for me in town like in McPherson. And yet, when I come up here there's wood to be put in the stoves, there's water that I have to work with. Make everything ready for morning, make kindling for morning. And sweep the floor, wash the dishes, cook. No end. There's fish to work with, there's meat too, there's no complaints from me. My body just feels so good. Sometimes I don't feel good down there [Fort McPherson] and I come up here the minute I open my door, nothing. I think when you are out on the land, you can't sit. There's something to do and you're doing it and your body feels so good. That's life. That's the real life that you are used to (Ibid).

Elizabeth's insight to living on the land demonstrates that a healthy way of living is one that kept physical activities by working on the land. By working with firewood,

providing for families by hunting, harvesting traditional medicines, or collecting water

for cooking and cleaning, Gwich'in are kept physically active and rooted to the land.

They are practicing their self-governance for themselves and with each other. That is the

part of the daily experiences of Teetł'it Gwich'in relation with the land that fulfills their

spiritual and physical needs, and does not confine them to the modern conveniences

offered in the community. Life on the land generates independence and self-reliance

through land-based practices and activities. Similar to the construction of cabins by the

Gwich'in as a means of resisting imposed landscapes described by Wishart and Loovers

(2013, p. 67). This is fundamental to the continuation of Teetł'it Gwich'in land-based

culture. Elizabeth's perspective illustrates how different life in the community is to the

preferred life out on the land at her cabin and, and how Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity

are vital to the continuance of their culture as a lived alternative to the imposed state

system of control through various policies, such as housing (Personal Interview,

September 30, 2012).

In light of what was shared with me, the elders' concerns demonstrate the changes

that have resulted from the introduction of sedentary social housing policies that have

altered how Teetł'it Gwich'in relate to the land, as well as its centrality in the struggle of

cultural continuity. For the elders, the land frees them to practice their Indigeneity, keeps

them culturally rooted, and maintains their physical health and well-being. As an early

government policy, housing was the primary political strategy for removing the people

from the land and integrating them into the dominant society. Housing, as an early form

of northern social policy, was utilized by the federal government to remove Teetł'it

Gwich'in from the land and sedentarize them. For the Teetł'it Gwich'in, connection to

the land is part of who they are and a practice that measures Gwich'in abilities to practice their self-governance by being on the land rather than under the thumb of the Canadian government.

Impacts of Residential School

A second policy implemented by the federal government that had a major impact on the Teetł'it Gwich'in was the Indian residential school (IRS) policy. In June of 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its final report uncovering the effects of residential school among Indigenous people across Canada. The TRC final report declared that the existence and function of residential schools played a central component in Canada's Aboriginal Policy, proclaiming it as acts of 'Cultural Genocide' against Indigenous peoples (TRC, 2015, p.1). What is important about the TRC final report is that it unveiled Canada's dark history of residential schools by giving voice to victims and their families. It also goes to great lengths in describing the colonial imprint onto the lives of Indigenous peoples by Canada. The TRC states, "Genuine reconciliation will not be possible until the legacy of [residential] schools is understood, acknowledged, and addressed" (p. 184); and sets out further recommendations addressing Canada's colonial actions to give meaningful power back to Indigenous peoples. Unveiling the impacts of the IRS policy needs to takes place in order for reconciliation to meaningfully occur, for the healing to commence and to better establish co-existence between the settler population and Indigenous peoples in Canada (TRC, 2015). In partnership with several churches, the IRS policy was designed to assimilate First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children into the Canadian mainstream (Stout & Peters, 2011, p. 9).

Across Canada many Indigenous children were taken from their homes and families for lengthy periods in order to be assimilated into 'civilized' citizens of the state. Residential school focused on teaching skills typically associated with menial labour and was geared towards employment in Canada's emerging industrial economy (RCAP, Vol. 1, p. 312). While this education was impractical in most contexts as most Indigenous people lived far away from industrial centres, it was especially ill-suited for the North where no real industrial economy existed. Canada's IRS policy was ultimately a crucial component of Canadian nation building and continued marginalization of Indigenous peoples (ibid). During this process, thousands of children were abused, traumatized, shamed, oppressed and some did not survive. Described as a "system [that] was born to 'civilize,' 'assimilate' and 'obliterate' the Indian in the child" (Stout & Peters, 2011, p. 10), the residential school era was a dark period in Teetł'it Gwich'in history and effects of these experiences has led to many negative intergenerational effects among Gwich'in families and communities.

While interviewing the elders, stories of residential school were brought up regularly by them as a way to emphasize dysfunctional relationships with the federal government. Several of the participants attended residential school as earliest as the mid 1940s and onward. The stories of how they endured the experiences of cultural, familial, and land dislocation, alongside cultural assimilation during their residential school experience was very emotional, and at times, difficult for me to bear witness to. As federal housing policies became part of the changing reality of the North, so did the notion that Indigenous nations, through their children, needed to modernize and assimilate into civilized Canadian society. Over the past decade the controversy of IRS

policy has been echoed across Canada, as many organizations, agencies, and Indigenous communities have sought to reveal what happened in those schools. Since the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1995 and the commencement of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008, the truth telling processes have begun to unravel this dark history as the victims began to tell their stories publically. In many communities survivors are courageously telling their stories, and while some have managed to fully exorcise their experiences, they did so with limited governmental support. Others, however, have yet to share their experiences.

For those that have come forward it has been a very empowering yet emotional process for them to deal with the effects of their experiences. The elders noted that the effects of being in residential school had greatly impacted them as children and as adults. The residential school experience was intended to undermine the relationship with their Gwich'in family, along with severing a collective sense of attachment to the land. Stout and Peters (2011) argue that the underlying purpose of residential school was "to assimilate children by disconnecting them from all their relationships, to family, community, culture, to their very selves – to take away their wellbeing as Indigenous people and nations – and to replace all the aspects of their being as with those of settler culture" (p. 11). In the context of my research, by displacing Gwich'in from the land, they introduced them to a more westernized lifestyle in order to engage and participate in a regional and capitalist economy designed to make Indigenous peoples, like the Gwich'in, proper citizens of the state. As described in the TRC report (2015), the goal of Canada's Aboriginal Policy was to eliminate the distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples and to assimilate them into dominant settler society, often against their will (p. 3). In

doing so, children were separated from their parents during residential school in order to

sever their connections to their land-based culture and identity (p. 2). By describing

'mission school experience', Paul Nadasdy (2003) informs how experiences of residential

school affected children among the Kluane First Nation by conditioning them to not think

independently and obedient to authority (p. 44-45). This 'conditioning' fostered a

generation of First Nations to become less active on the land and to not learn and practice

the traditions of their people (ibid). By removing Indigenous peoples from their lands

they lose their connections to it, rendering their ability to be self-sufficient and self-

governing as a people.

For elder Bertha Francis, being in an institution like residential school, introduced

a radically different way of life for her. She was seven years old when she left her family

who were living a subsistence-based way of life out on the land on a full-time basis in the

late 1940s. She attended residential school in the nearby community of Aklavik, NWT.

She did not see her family for long periods of time while at the residential school. She

found the transition especially difficult:

> I did not know a word of English and I went to school. I started realizing about
> Christmas, Easter, all these special days, and when you went to school they did
> things on those special days because we were not allowed to come home. We had
> to stay in school during the big days. And we sit there, and we wonder where's
> our parents? Where's our grandparents? All these kinds of things we went
> through. A big change (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

Being away from her parents and grandparents was a significant change for a young child

like Bertha and the cultural difference at the school was always obvious:

> You had to go into school and it was just like a white man way of living. Before
> that we lived the way our ancestors lived right on the land. And getting our food
> right off the land…everything was off the land…when you went to residential
> school, everything was different. You couldn't speak your language, you had to
> speak in English in order to learn whatever they were trying to teach you…we had

> to eat food what they gave us, no choice in our kind of food…They made a big change in our way of life and I remember being home, spiritually was very strong by then with our grandparents (ibid).

Being removed from her family and lands, and the sense of well-being that this provided, greatly impacted Bertha and others like her into adulthood. Being situated in a foreign setting, residential school attempted to break down the customs and culture among Teetł'it Gwich'in children, like Bertha, because it was presumed that Teetł'it Gwich'in culture did not 'fit' within a civilized, capitalist economy in this new North. Gwich'in families had no choice over who was to attend residential school, and few families were given the option of deciding who would be raised by their parents and grandparents instead of being sent to the school.

The TRC final report (2015) state that residential school played a significant role in preventing the transmission of Indigenous knowledge and cultural values from one generation to the next (p. 1). Prior to residential school, a Teetł'it Gwich'in upbringing was based in a close-knit family structure that provided a sense of belonging, passed on cultural norms, and connected children to their people and the land. For elder Elizabeth Colin[9], residential school was not a life that she was accustomed to as a child. Where life out on the land, there was no concept of standardized time, or a coordinated schedule of duties, all of this was very foreign to them:

> When I went to residential school it was so, so different. You had to go by time, when to sleep, when to eat, and all that. And I found it very, very hard at times. It was way different than being taught at home. At home, we had no time, I don't think we even had clock. But we knew what we had to do. There's things at certain time to do too and residential school was too much rules that I couldn't get used to (Personal Interview, September 30, 2012).

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[9] Elizabeth, alongside Bertha Francis, also attended residential school in Aklavik, NWT in the late 1940s.

The rigid teaching system and organization around "time" was a system not used by Teetł'it Gwich'in and their families who did not base their teachings in western pedagogy and paradigms. Teaching in Teetł'it Gwich'in culture is experiential, place-based, and time has little basis within Gwich'in pedagogy. As the previous chapter noted, Gwich'in pedagogy has its own ways of passing on knowledge, particularly within immediate and extended families (Loovers, 2010, p. 304). Gwich'in learning was not confined to the western constructs of time, as residential school was. Instead, Gwich'in pedagogy schedules learning around the fluidity of the land, its changing seasons, and the ability of elders to teach the skills and customs of the culture within the corresponding season. This pedagogy played a central role in the transmission of Gwich'in culture, which included land-based practices and experiential learning alongside elders (ibid). Learning Gwich'in knowledge and skills in this way allows Gwich'in to maintain their connections to lands and their ancestors. Without the knowledge learned from their people out on the land, individuals are not able to be self-sufficient 'Gwich'in.'

For some elders, the residential school experience had a devastating impact on their cultural connections and sense of who they were. Stout and Peters (2011) argue that this is quite common among residential school survivors, whose traumas had wide-ranging and intergenerational effects on their families, and communities (p. 13). As children left familiar surroundings to pursue western education they would only return years later, as "strangers to their own land, culture, and families" (Dene Nation, 1984, p. 19). As a form of cultural assimilation, many elders spent years growing up isolated from their families and culture within the residential school system. Elder Sarah Jerome describes this process:

> When we were taken away from our families, put into an institution, [they] institutionalized us…just took us away from the beautiful, safe, loving environment of what we were in…They just completely assimilated us into being Canadians. Red on the outside, White on the inside. That's what they were trying to do, just destroyed our self-esteem, our confidence…The day before I was taken to residential school how physically, mentally, spiritually, psychologically I was 100% whole and healthy. That first day of residential school was when the anger started. Twelve years of residential school. Anger, no voice, robot, no feelings, I walked out of that residential school. I had nothing. No pride, no self esteem, no identity (Personal Interview, October 6, 2012).

The removal from family and their cultural setting resulted in many having to deal with the identity loss and anger that came with years of assimilation. This was ideal for the federal government to gain control over a people whose connection to place had been broken down after generations of residential schooling. It also ensured that fewer Gwich'in were able to comfortably live out on the land, as they did not have the opportunity to learn many of the required skills from their parents and grandparents in the family setting. Their sense of being Gwich'in through their forms of being self-governing was severed due to the disconnect between people and lands during the residential school period.

To this day, individual experiences like Sarah's continue to have lasting effects as many deal with them on a daily basis. Sarah also described the health effects that many Gwich'in in her generation have to deal with in their lives as a result of how they were treated in residential school:

> They locked the doors from the outside. I remember thinking one night when I wanted to go to the washroom I was trying to open the door. I couldn't open the door. I thought to myself 'at least when I was at home I can drink water when I want, I can go to the washroom whenever I want, I can't even do that here'. And because of that, a lot of people peed in bed. Today, a lot of that generation have bladder infections because of that. Nobody talks about that (ibid).

The life of those in residential school prevented them from being able to live freely and to learn traditional land-based knowledge and teachings from their parents and grandparents out on the land. Learning through their own pedagogy allows the Teetł'it Gwich'in to maintain connections to their ancestors and lands, and thus are able to live their culture as guided by their cultural and social traditions allowing them to be self-governing. The example that Sarah shares provides us with the understanding how a generation of Teetł'it Gwich'in have become impacted emotionally, physically, and spiritually as a people. The imprint that residential school left on the lives of Teetł'it Gwich'in has been long lasting and will probably not be fully forgotten. However, for many Gwich'in, sharing their stories with their families, community, and other survivors has been helpful in beginning the healing process.

The stories shared by the elders have provided me with the understanding of the deep impact that residential school has had on the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Even today many Teetł'it Gwich'in are still dealing with the resulting cultural and language loss. Like their experiences with the introduction of housing, the residential school experience deeply affected and changed the people and culture. The stories shared by the elders on housing and residential school illustrates the assimilation attempts and removal from their people, culture, and land that has created devastating and lasting impacts to their identity, culture, and connection to people and lands. The disconnection of people to their lands severs their ability to be self-governing and independent from any outside control. These words shared by the elders exemplify how the control and assimilation through IRS policy was part of the broader process of dislocating Indigenous peoples from their home territories and enforcing a policy of sedentary settlement in Indian Affairs-managed communities.

The removal of Teetł'it Gwich'in children from their families, cultures, and lands sought to remove any sense of identity and connection to their lands. This policy was a central nation-building policy and part of a larger strategy for a single Canadian identity (RCAP, Vol 1, p. 309; TRC, 2015). As families were forced to send their children away, many did not know the ill treatment or the long-term impact that these schools would have on their children, their family, and their people as a whole.

Changing Traditional Governance

Early federal policies were instrumental in influencing how Teetł'it Gwich'in selected their leaders, ultimately imposing a different leadership selection process and exerting a kind of colonial sovereignty over the Teetł'it Gwich'in. The federal government's imposition of the *Indian Act* governance system replaced Teetł'it Gwich'in processes with ones governed by settler ideals post Treaty 11 signing, including over time a new ballot-box elected chief and council. This new system slowly transformed the traditional leadership structures not just in Gwich'in communities, but in Dene communities across the North. In traditional Dene societies, certain rules and expectations governed leaders' conduct. To prevent their leaders from abusing their power, leadership selection involved choosing individuals whose personalities embodied the kind of traits necessary to assist and guide the people. The people themselves all participated in this discussion before any final selection was made, adhering to long-respected protocols (Dene Nation, 1984, p. 15). Rene Fumoleau (2004) suggests that this was nearly universal for Dene:

> Traditional Indian power structure[s] depended on the absolute support of the community. Power came from the people, and the chief would consult them for every decision. This system contrasted sharply with the organization which was imposed by the Indian Act and confirmed by the treaties (p. 280).

Gwich'in leadership selection processes began to change during the negotiation of Treaty

11 in 1921. Where traditional practices were in effect at that time, there were too many

people for the treaty to be easily negotiated by the Crown, so certain Gwich'in leaders

were appointed by Canadian treaty commissioners to negotiate and sign the treaty with

the Crown on behalf of all the people. This process undermined older selection processes

long used by the Dene people, and transferred much of the stature of leader selection and

validation from the people to the Canadian state and its representatives (ibid). In fact, the

role of a "chief" did not actually exist prior to treaty negotiations of 1921 in the north.

Teetł'it Gwich'in elders noted how they self-governed themselves and leaders were

respectfully called and chosen by the people to be as headman or *Dinjii Chit* and were

expected to have many skills and responsibilities to land, the people, and adhere to their

land-based traditions (Bertha Francis, Personal Interview September 27, 2012; Alice

Vittrekwa, Personal Interview, October 3, 2012). Johnny Kay, a Teetł'it Gwich'in elder

and signatory to Treaty 11 signed in 1921, stated that during negotiations the Crown

Treaty Commissioner Conroy urged the current Gwich'in leader, Julius Salu to sign a

piece of paper. When Salu asked Conroy why he should sign it, Conroy responded by

telling him, "after he signs it, from there on, he is a chief." This process of the Canadian

validation of Gwich'in leadership signaled the beginning of a shift in the ability of

outside authorities like missionaries, trading post employees, and government men, to

influence who would be selected to represent the people in important political and

diplomatic matters (Fumoleau, 2004, p. 280-281). Soon after Treaty 11's signing in 1921,

many of these appointed leaders were ignored by Canadian officials, and were

continuously undermined when they attempted to fulfill their roles in relation to the

federal government (ibid). After the treaty, the appointment of chiefs were increasingly influenced by outside forces that changed the way that Teetł'it Gwich'in chose their leaders, and how those leaders governed the people. With the introduction of the *Indian Act* system after Treaty 11, the process of electing chiefs and councillors to represent the community changed further. The needs of administrating the Indian Act and federal institutions took precedence over traditional responsibilities where leaders were formally selected based on knowledge of the land and the successful governance of the community as determined by the people.

For the elders, Teetł'it Gwich'in life changed after the "white man government" was introduced post Treaty 11 and elders consistently stated their preference for the old way of life because in those days they understood and were aware that the Teetł'it Gwich'in governed themselves without interference (Robert Alexie Sr., Personal Interview, October 8, 2012). Historically, elder Robert Alexie Sr. says,

> peoples enjoyed everything, done everything as they wished. Today, too many orders and laws coming from white people. A lot of peoples are going by that now, [saying]"You gotta do this and do that." Like I said, I don't like white man law. White man say 'do this, do that.' I liked it the way it was in the past. It should have been like that (ibid).

Gwich'in self-governance allowed Teetł'it Gwich'in to live and practice their own governance based on their own political norms. They utilized their own decision-making processes based on community consensus and principles of traditional political orders that pre-date the *Indian Act*'s band council system. Teetł'it Gwich'in social relations and forms of cultural and spiritual protocols were directed and guided by their land-based activities.

Traditionally, Teetł'it Gwich'in laws were grounded in the decision-making capabilities of the people, and considered in the context of relationships with the land, animals, and other peoples. As mentioned in previous chapter, elder Mary Effie Snowshoe (Personal Interview, October 3, 2012) suggests that Gwich'in traditional self-governance differentiates itself from the white man government by doing things in a way that is guided by the community and in a culturally relevant way. They communicated in their language their worldview through the words of their ancestors and guided by their innate knowledge and relationship of the land (ibid). This traditional governing system allowed the Teetł'it Gwich'in to fully practice their social and cultural traditions that encouraged a continued subsistence lifestyle on the land. Their governance is rooted in the land that fosters a reciprocal relationship of dependence and allows them to be self-governing.

Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance involved several key principles. Above all Gwich'in prized independent decision-making, but also sought to build collective consensus when acting in larger groups. Teetł'it Gwich'in also incorporated the necessities of land-based ways of living and the practices associated with them, as central features of Gwich'in self-governance. These principles helped to ensure Teetł'it Gwich'in physical, spiritual and cultural survival and continuity, as well as respecting the freedom of the people. This is how the elders described their understanding of Gwich'in governance. For elder Mary Effie Snowshoe, contemporary self-governance has evolved into an overtly institutionalized system compared to the more dynamic and community-based self-governance practices. She states, "today they are talking about self-government and my understanding about it's not going to be the same" (Personal

Interview, October 3, 2012). Mary's statement reflects on her understanding of how self-governance was practiced among her people in the past as compared to the present day political structure of self-governance as provided by the many rules and stipulations of state. Being self-governing for Teetł'it Gwich'in involves being independent of outside forces and being an active participant in the creation of the laws of the people—as guided by their knowledge of and practice of land-based traditions (Mary Effie Snowshoe, Personal Interview, October 3, 2012).

In contemporary times, under the guise of electoral democracy, self-government usually dictates Indigenous peoples to conform to the Canadian politico-legal (Irlbacher Fox, 2009, p. 3). In this light, the *Indian Act*'s band council system has sought to change the traditional Indigenous governance systems already in place among the Teetł'it Gwich'in. However, this policy disregards governance practices that include the people in the collective decision-making on almost all issues of common concern. *Indian Act* governance prevented Teetł'it Gwich'in from practicing their traditional laws and customs as a political people. For instance, rather than embodying a broad inclusive orientation for decision-making, for many years, only men over the age of 18 could vote in elections, preventing the women and youth in community governance (Shaw, 2008, p. 96-97). Today, the *Indian Act* system is constituted in complicated rules and regulations over which the federal government retains final approval (Justice Laws, 2014). This outside control of Teetł'it Gwich'in governance regularly disregards the social and cultural practices of Gwich'in self-governance.

Gwich'in scholar Crystal Frank (2011) argues that these introduced forms of western style governance and leadership do not reflect traditional Gwich'in values. For

example, Frank shares that Chief and Council community meetings no longer use talking

sticks that regulate fair participation among the people. Instead, they now use agendas

for direction and the ideas and concerns among the people are often ignored (p. 36).

Likewise, in her work describing Indigenous-state relations in the North, Stephanie

Irlbacher-Fox (2009) argues that the paternalistic treatment of Indigenous peoples, by the

federal government continues into the present. She notes that during a self-government

negotiation meeting, Gwich'in and Inuvialuit leaders argued with a federal negotiator

over their jurisdiction over language and cultural programs, the federal negotiator asked,

"Why, exactly, do Inuvialuit and Gwich'in need control of culture and language? These

are policy-based programs, I don't see the point in why we are discussing them. There is

no jurisdiction here" (p. 139). Such a response demonstrates the lack of interest by the

federal government in Gwich'in claiming basic control over their own cultural affairs in

an effort to once-again be self-governing in their own right. As several of the elders

mentioned, the Teetł'it Gwich'in have long had a system of their own before the

influence of outsiders on their lands. Their system is unique and differs from the *Indian*

Act model that has been imposed by the state that has limited the people's ability to

control their own destiny. A component of governance is that it is dictated by their

cultural and spiritual relationship to the land. If their connections to the land is severed by

housing and residential school policies, and their leadership is now controlled and

influenced by outside forces through the *Indian Act*, then true self governing nature

among the Gwich'in is at stake. They are not self-governing and free as their ancestors

once were. Teetł'it Gwich'in leadership structure is based on the collectivity of people,

being connected to land, and guidance by their ancestral teachings of land-based

activities that contributes to their spiritual wellness, cultural continuity, and self-governance.

The elders suggested that the imposed electoral system of *Indian Act* chief and council moved away from Teetł'it Gwich'in political processes that selected multiple leaders based on various skills and qualities necessary to lead a land-based people. However, according to Elder Bertha Francis, the current chief and council system has transformed leadership styles to suit the system, not to reflect the needs of the Teetł'it Gwich'in:

> Time are changing and they [band council government] are doing things the [white man] government way. Just like the way the [white man] government runs, that is the way they [band council] are doing things but way back was our way. It was a Gwich'in way of doing things (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

Bertha's perspective on the inadequacy of the imposed chief and council governance system shows us that this is not a system that benefits the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Rather, it is a system that entrenches a different kind of hierarchical authority that is inconsistent with Teetł'it Gwich'in political traditions grounded in relationships between Teetł'it Gwich'in and with their lands. Shelagh Beairsto (1999) states that this inconsistency is a site of conflict with Canadian authorities as found in Gwich'in communities. As Gwich'in communities are guided by their deep social, spiritual and economic relationships as guided by the traditions of the culture, and hierarchical political structure based in western societies tend to clash with the more culturally rooted, flat structures as found in Gwich'in societies (p. 151). Adding to this, elder Sarah Jerome also describes how the imposed governance systems confines the people to a colonial framework for organizing themselves:

> Colonialism is alive and well up here…Because we are here and why are the government making decisions for us? We have a mind, we have self government long before they came along. And the ironic thing is that our legislative assembly is majority aboriginal people and yet they are doing the exact what they government did to us (Personal Interview, October 6, 2012).

The imposition of the government policies in the lives of the Teetł'it Gwich'in has created a system of control that regulates the everyday affairs of the people, confining the self-governing practices of the Teetł'it Gwich'in to a narrow colonial framework. This is not true self-governance as described by the Teetł'it Gwich'in elders.

The elders' stories demonstrated the changes in Teetł'it Gwich'in elected leadership have impacted the ways in which the federal government has imposed their laws onto Teetł'it Gwich'in, limiting their ability to practice their own system of self-governance. The elders shared their perspectives on governance and agree that the imposed system of electoral chief and council under Canada's *Indian Act* resembles the same structure of the "white man system." However, this changing governance of the Teetł'it Gwich'in undermines the political freedom of the people. Rather than being able to live in a free society of their own making, Teetł'it Gwich'in now exercise governance under the *Indian Act's* chief and council system, even though it was designed to fit western ideals, and appointed, legitimized and approved by the government of Canada. As of now, Teetł'it Gwich'in are not able to live and practice their own self-governance on their own terms and decision making processes, as they have always done in the past. The reflection of the elders on these issues speaks to the ways they see the incompatibility of the *Indian Act* governance system with their own principles of self-governance. Under this system, Teetł'it Gwich'in are not free or self-governing people, but rather a colonized people living under the indirect control of the Canadian state.

Conclusion

In spending time and listening to the narratives from the elders, their words and perspectives provide us with a unique understanding on how federal policies designed to modernize and assimilate Indigenous people have impacted the lives of the Teetł'it Gwich'in. These narratives unveil the complexity of Gwich'in-Canada relations by demonstrating the incompatibility of these policies with their traditional forms of self-governance guided by land-based traditions and teachings. With the introduction of early federal policies, such as social housing, the federal government created a significant shift away from the independence of land-based practices towards dependency on federal programming to survive. The people now live in the community on an annual basis, and spend less time on the land each year. This situation undermines access and connection to the land that is vital to the transmission and practice of the traditional knowledge and their culture and the independence that it provides to allow them to be a self-governing people. The creation of residential schools, as an institution, has removed them from their families and lands in attempts to sever their direct connection to culture and identity. Lastly, the changing leadership practices has changed the way their people conceive of and practice self-governance guided by their land-based practices. The elders have witnessed vast changes in their own lifetimes and over the course of a few generations within their families, but it is also significant that the elders believe that their people can return to being a self-governing and free people. The next chapter focuses on Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity that is guided by their land-based connections

that fosters a sense of cultural and social wellness as dictated by their ancestral

knowledge embedded within their cultural and social landscapes.

Chapter Three: Gwindii Gwa'an Yiinjigwicidhoh'eh – "Respect Everything Around You"

Introduction

Grounded in traditional knowledge in hand with land-based practices and teachings, the concept of Indigeneity is characterized by Indigenous peoples asserting their social, spiritual, economic, political, and cultural ways of life that are instrumental to the perpetuation of their Indigenous worldview. In this regard, Indigenous peoples' practices of their Indigeneity is unique, vary from place to place, and an essential practice to their self-determination (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013; Maaka & Fleras, 2005; Christie, 2011). This final chapter will focus on Teetł'it Gwich'in worldviews to unveil their expressions of Indigeneity that provides a normative framework outside the state-centric processes that attempt to disenfranchise Indigenous land-based ways of being. The perspectives shared by Teetł'it Gwich'in elders contain a Gwich'in cultural philosophy that highlights their connections to land, illustrates key elements of their traditional governance, and provides cultural and spiritual wellness through healthy living rooted in land-based practices. This chapter presents elder testimonies that centre on the expressions of Teetł'it Gwich'in Indigeneity embedded in the stories of their people, their culture, and ways of life.

Building an understanding of Gwich'in self-governance and land-based practice and teachings, this chapter explores the many diverse narratives identified by the Teetł'it Gwich'in elders. First, this chapter examines Teetł'it Gwich'in connection to land and the centrality of land-based practice to Gwich'in sense of self. Next, this chapter looks at how land-based practices and practices of Indigeneity teach Teetł'it Gwich'in how to be Gwich'in. Then this chapter explores how Teetł'it Gwich'in elders explain Gwich'in self-

governance and leadership in grounded terms. This section details how Gwich'in

"headmen" or *Dinjii Chit* are expected to act, as well how the collective governance

principles of respect and sharing that underpin Gwich'in self-governance. Finally, this

chapter explores the connection between life on the land and the spiritual, emotional, and

physical health of Teetł'it Gwich'in, echoing the elders insistence that a return to land-

based practices is essential for the long-term health and well-being of the Gwich'in.

Teetł'it Gwich'in Nankak Gwizhii K'iighe' Tra'agwandaih– "Teetł'it Gwich'in Connection with the Land"

For the Teetł'it Gwich'in, Indigeneity is centered on their social, physical, and cultural

relationship with the land. This involves access to, and use of, their traditional lands,

invoking land-based living as guided by their cultural and spiritual traditions, as well as

maintaining an enduring relationship with the land. Robert Wishart (2004) describes a

key element of Teetł'it Gwich'in life as their ability to harvest resources from the land, a

process that sustains both their physical being and their on-going relationships with the

animals with whom they share the land (p. 147). These relationships reveal how Teetł'it

Gwich'in connect with their land while contributing to the sustainability of social

relations (p. 207). For example, in practicing land-based living, Gwich'in are actualizing

a Gwich'in sense of self by maintaining key social relationships defined by well-

established traditions. By doing so, Gwich'in exercise a fundamental part of their self-

determination: practicing their land-based self-governance traditions rooted in on-the

land relationships, both as individuals and as families.

In Dene societies, extended families are typically central to the governance of the

people. Having extensive personal knowledge of their homelands is essential in

maintaining Dene cultural, social, and political institutions (Dene Nation, 1984, p. 11).

Elders play a particularly important role in this practice. For Gwich'in, skilled and

knowledgeable elders are highly respected and play a key part in the health of these

political institutions (Wilson, 1997, p. 7). They are seen as the bridge of the ancestral

past to the present times and play a fundamental part in the transmission of knowledge

among the people. Gwich'in elders are seen as the strength of the culture and therefore

are highly respected (ibid). For Teetł'it Gwich'in, connections to the land are essential for

life based in large families. It is the job of elders to demonstrate how to best live and

perpetuate a collective system of self-governance. Gwich'in self-governance involves

practicing land-based ways of life and maintaining the many relationships—with humans

and non-humans—that arise from such connections. How the elders explain and practice

self-governance as Teetł'it Gwich'in, however, does not necessarily clearly align with the

western political science definition commonly associated with the term. In the Gwich'in

language, elders describe these practices as *Nakhwanh Gwich'in Khehłok Iidilii* which

means "we are our own people." Elder Mary Effie Snowshoe explains that Teetł'it

Gwich'in exercised their self-governance, by

> get[ing] together and discuss[ing] this among one another in the language. There
> is no white person there to speak English to them and telling them you cannot do
> this or you could do these things. Everything was just Gwich'in people and this is
> why I said they were *self*-government. Nobody was the government for them
> (Personal Interview, October 3, 2012).

Self-governance is the belief in the collective freedom of the Teetł'it Gwich'in to practice

their land-based practices rooted in traditional knowledge, in a way that fundamentally

ensures their physical, spiritual, and cultural continuity. All the elders who were

interviewed described how they were raised in a closely-knit family unit, which managed

itself by the allocation of individual responsibilities of every member, each of which

contributed to a larger system of self-governance. For elder Elizabeth Colin, her

upbringing out on the land with her family was itself a form of self-governance and the

values she learned growing up at her family bush camp were the basis of this practice:

> My values come from the elders from the past and our parents…you know teaching us. We were raised at Three Cabin [Creek]. Most of the year…we're there…everybody is busy, we do our own thing…Just really the old-time way. Doing everything. We don't sit around. Everybody is moving, moving because we had to. We had to make sure everything was running smoothly… Really what you call *our* own. We are governing ourselves (Personal Interview, September 30, 2012).

Elizabeth's statement demonstrates how living on the land was a collective process of

families practicing their self-governance through everyday work embodied in camp life

and subsistence activities. Elders transmit both skills and values to the younger

generation through these everyday camp activities. This included an understanding that

Gwich'in are dependent upon the land and must adapt to its changing seasons while

making use of what it provides to them. This way of living garnered a sense of wellness

and unity within each family and as a larger people. By living a land-based lifestyle

within a close-knit family structure, Teetł'it Gwich'in families are as free as possible

from any unwanted outsider governance and can live and practice their culture in a way

that protects their independence and provide cultural unity.

For Indigenous cultures, the land binds them to their cultural, physical, and

spiritual ways of life (Dene Nation, 1984; Deloria, 2006; Basso, 1996). For the

Gwich'in, storied practices and teachings are intrinsically tied to the lands on which

they've travelled and were raised. Thus, Gwich'in oral narratives almost always contain a

detailed description of the physical landscape affiliated with the story to situate the

people and events on the landscape (Beaumont, 1998, p. 32). Each region within the

Gwich'in homeland contains stories that pass on the meanings and sites of significance

for the many places and locations contained within (Frank, 2011, p.3). In the most

obvious examples, "Teetł'it Gwich'in" means "People of the Headwaters" and Vuntut

Gwich'in means "People of the Lakes." The land provides direction and a mental map for

the people who use these names, dictating how they conduct themselves and govern

themselves. These geographic names also communicate sacred responsibilities for the

people and the place that they take their name. This is where their self-governance arises

from, their land and their place, their name.

This way of life allows Gwich'in to live life on their own terms, which is how

Teetł'it Gwich'in commonly define freedom. Being able to live off the land, as it

prevents dependency, provides both a freedom to determine one's own authority

structures while also contributing to a sense of cultural, spiritual, and physical wellness.

For Teetł'it Gwich'in, interconnectedness situates Gwich'in in a larger intrinsic web of

what Peter Loovers (2010) describes as a "sentient field of manifold relations" (p. 199).

This set of relations includes people, animals, the land, plants, weather, spiritual beings,

air, water, and various other elements of the earth. Loovers suggests that Teetł'it

Gwich'in define these relations through their everyday practices on the land, using the

term *gwiinzii kwùndei*, the good life (ibid). Loovers describes this concept as "a poetic

statement of knowing and being, and of the person's experience in practices of being"

(ibid). Through the practice of *gwiinzii kwùndei* is a type of freedom that allows the

Teetł'it Gwich'in to practice their cultural traditions and to live as a people on the land.

It involves protection from any outside interference while they practice their governance

that is born from their teachings of the land and emerge from Gwich'in social

relationships.

Like Loovers, Robert Wishart (2004) describes Teetł'it Gwich'in land

'ownership' as an understanding that the people were raised on the land and had acquired

a direct knowledge of it, ensuring that they would take care of the land for the use of

future generations. He writes, Teetł'it Gwich'in "talk about their country in ways that

bridge past ancestral ties to the land with their own present activities to convey an

understanding of tenure that includes activity and knowledge" (p. 161). This is how

Teetł'it Gwich'in elder Robert Alexie Sr. describes his relationship to his traditional

lands. Robert is a well-respected Gwich'in hunter and trapper who carries extensive

knowledge of the land. His cultural identity is intimately connected to his upbringing on

the land. The traditional knowledge he acquired ties his connection to Teetł'it Gwich'in

land:

> Teetł'it Gwich'in to me means I'm a true Indian that belongs in this country and
> the country is mine as I live on this land…[its] a very precious name…That's a
> great word for me. I am free in this country (Personal Interview, October 8, 2012).

Robert's sense of political freedom is rooted in his land, it defines who he is and provides

him a sense of belonging because he was raised there. This land is where he developed

his knowledge of how to live on the land. He has direct ties to the land that provide him

with a sense of pride as well as a sense of belonging and place, something that is

synonymous with being Teetl'it Gwich'in. Robert also shared memories of his

upbringing, offering a sense of how independent Teetł'it Gwich'in were from outside

authority and therefore able to live as a free people on their lands:

> I lived out on the land many times in my life…[it's] the most enjoyable
> time…spending time out on the land. And you're *free* out there. You don't have

to be taught, someone else coming around telling, they have to do this and do that…Gwich'ins never done that in the past…Just enjoy life out there on the land…That's what it's all about, Teetł'it Gwich'in out on the land…that's what they call living off the land. Getting everything off the land. They get everything off the land and then you give it. This is the way it used to be (Ibid).

Robert's early life experience on the land is his fondest memory that carries with it important teachings of who he is as Teetł'it Gwich'in. For him the sense of being out on the land, and sharing of resources important for maintaining relations, is the most vital part of *gwiinzii kwùndei,* living the good life. Not only does being out on the land provide Robert with the ability to live in cultural freedom but to live as a Teetł'it Gwich'in, it is a vital component to the practice to his self-governance. By continuing to live out on the land and exercising cultural practices and teachings of their land-based culture, Teetł'it Gwich'in are self-governing on their terms within the landscape in which they are shaped and defined to be who they are.

Today, some Teetł'it Gwich'in elders continue to live life on the land. In fact, all of those who were interviewed said they prefer to stay out at their cabins as often as they can. To invoke the concept of *gwiinzii kwùndei*, Peter Loovers (2010) describes how elders enjoy land-based living, as "camp life brings along its own rhythms and movements and the serenity and peacefulness is highly valued by elderly Gwich'in who feel comfortable in the bush and enjoy it" (p. 218). Life out on the land provides the elders with a sense of freedom to practice and live their culture. Ernest and Alice Vittrekwa, for instance, live nearly year-round at their cabin approximately eleven kilometers south of Teetł'it Zheh on the Peel River. They keep busy by working with resources from the land and harvesting food, such as berries, fish, and wild meat. For

Ernest, being on the land by living a subsistence-based culture is the only world he knows

and is therefore the one he chooses to live in:

> Well I'm proud to be Gwich'in, that's all I got. You see right here, your living on
> the land. It's Gwich'in life. We could do other things, but this is where we live
> now…we have to keep going…I'm a Gwich'in and proud to be. (Personal
> Interview, October 12, 2012).

His sense of belonging is intrinsically tied to the land, in which he feels he needs to live

in order to be fully who he is as a Teetł'it Gwich'in person. He also believes that learning

in his culture is a lifelong process in which he still experiences at his age, enabling his

land-based skills and continued use of the land:

> We're talking fifty years experience probably on the land and you don't
> graduate. It's a lifelong process…I'm 69 years old, and I'm still learning. I work
> with nets, I go down the river and I set nets for fish…I learned to use a certain
> weight for my net, and that way I catch fish differently too…It took me fifty years
> to experience that and I was proud too because I learned something. Everyday I
> learn something. It's a lifetime experience (ibid).

For these elders being Teetł'it Gwich'in is synonymous with living on, and learning

from, the land. Ernest's land-based experiences reaffirms that this way of life is centrally

important to the survival of his culture. By living freely day-to-day and practicing his

land-based activities, Ernest is provided with a freedom from outside interference. He

also continues to grow by utilizing lifelong learning to better appreciate his ancestral

Teetł'it Gwich'in teachings.

As the elders demonstrate, the Teetł'it Gwich'in connection to land is very much

a part of their cultural, physical, and spiritual sense of self and well-being. Without the

land, they are not able to practice the many components of their Indigeneity that

encompass their lives. By practicing their land-based way of life, the elders practice an

autonomous form of self-governance, free from outside interference. For these elders, being Teetł'it Gwich'in is synonymous with living a free life on the land.

Juudin iidalih Gwijiinchii Nilii - "The Importance of Being Who We Are"

Learning land-based skills and other forms of traditional knowledge are instrumental for the Teetł'it Gwich'in. For thousands of years, this knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation, supporting the land-based ways of life still practiced today. Embedded in these practices is a Teetł'it Gwich'in pedagogy that informs how Teetł'it Gwich'in come to know the world. Knowledge transmission in Gwich'in culture occurs through many different activities, but being out on the land, learning to pay attention to teachings of elders, and an on-going form of community engagement are central (Loovers 2010, p. 304). A key Gwich'in pedagogical practice is learning through observation and experience to acquire the protocols and techniques embedded within the cultural and social traditions of the culture. Traditional knowledge is integral to the identity of the Teetł'it Gwich'in people; it informs them of who they are. It provides them with skills and knowledge to survive on the land, provides a unique worldview based on such knowledge, and allows individuals to practice self-governance. For Rebecca,[10] her ability to provide for her relatives was passed down to her through the transmission of knowledge from her mother, grandmother, and the grandmothers before them. By preparing fish and wild meat or tanning hides, Rebecca takes pride in the work she is able to do for her family. The knowledge that was passed down to her is instrumental to her sense of self:

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[10] Her real name was not used due to participant's request to remain anonymous. Instead the name 'Rebecca' was chosen and will be used to protect the identity of the participant.

This is my mom's country. What she learned from her grandmother, because my mom's mom passed away when she was not even a year old…her grandmother raised her…taught her all these, that's where she learned to tan. What I learned from my mother, she learned from her grandmother (Personal Interview, October 5, 2012).

Transmission of traditional knowledge and teachings are very important components to Teetł'it Gwich'in culture because it is a practice that ensures the Gwich'in traditional way of life is secure. It ensures the continuation of their knowledge and the ability to use their land-based skills, and thus, to be free. As individuals are empowered by their skills and teachings they are guided by the knowledge that provides a continuation of their individual and collective self-governance by being connected to land and practicing their traditions upon it. It empowers individuals to be independent, while also supporting the larger web of relations among the people.

A central form of Gwich'in knowledge transmission is storytelling. Storytelling is a form of pedagogy that is communal, provides interpersonal interaction, and is an act of self-governance. Stories have an important role among the Gwich'in, oral history recounts of traditions that keeps storied accounts alive, it provides a continuity of cultural knowledge, especially the land-based knowledge that makes freedom and self-governance possible. (p. 197-198). Elder Mary Effie Snowshoe describes how important storied practices (Christie, 2011) are among the Teetł'it Gwich'in:

Storytelling was so important to us, and then we are out on the land, and we are doing things. We sit with old people, they are speaking the language, and we are sitting there listening, we speak the language. We go out and start working with those people, like working with meat. You are doing it and you are learning (Personal Interview, October 3, 2012).

Teaching and passing on the knowledge, like storytelling, within Gwich'in culture is a kind of experiential learning that, when most successful, engages all members of the

community. Teetł'it Gwich'in knowledge of land and self-governance is vast. Passing on

knowledge in this way was also central to a Teetł'it Gwich'in sense of self, Mary Effie

notes how stories flow on the land:

> People was so healthy, and they're proud to be Gwich'in because they live right
> on the land and they taught the young people…If you was [went] to one camp,
> whoever is there they're going to share with you. They're going to share the
> stories with you, they're going to tell all the history of our Gwich'in people. How
> they used to live, and this is why it is so important to be Gwich'in person…You
> hear the story of the people. They're so smart, healthy, and caring, and looking
> after one another, as a family, and that was so important. This is why we say I am
> proud of who I am. If it wasn't for my background, I don't know what I am going
> to be like today…They taught us and here we are with our knowledge way back.
> There's lots (ibid).

Teetł'it Gwich'in traditional knowledge therefore carries connections between the past

and present. Elders were always eager to teach the younger generations of the past and of

where they come from. For them, understanding ancestral history and knowing who they

are as Teetł'it Gwich'in is a very important teaching device for elders who encouraged

young people to participate in every aspect of community life. In essence, becoming

knowledgeable, harboring skills and the ways of their ancestors empowers the Teetł'it

Gwich'in to be independent, free, and in their own way they are themselves, they are

"being" their Indigeneity. They are governing themselves once empowered with their

ancestral knowledge.

Nakhwanh Gwich'in Khehł'ok Iidillii - "We Are Our Own People"

Teetł'it Gwich'in Indigeneity also involves the practice of traditional governance through

well-established notions of leadership, respect, and sharing. Gwich'in traditional

governance practices are based on a collective undertaking of the people that centers on

the relationships that emerge from land-based ways of life (Beairsto, 1999, p.125).

Teetł'it Gwich'in governance was practiced through values demonstrating an innate

respect for people, land and animals, while sharing resources with others for mutually

assured survival (Dene Nation, 1984, p. 11; Frank, 2011, p. 35, 46-47).

Rob Wishart (2004) writes how the Gwich'in describe their political practices as

being related to that of caribou. In caribou herds, the caribou leadership is respected for

their strength, they are followed because of their knowledge of land and in return they are

expected to ensure the survival of the herd (p. 65). Small bands of caribou live together

as relatives during winter and summer months, and all join together in congregation in

the fall and spring to rely on the older respected caribou to lead them across the huge

expanse of land in search of food (ibid). The caribou herd's reliance on the older 'leaders'

is similar to Gwich'in notions of leadership, respect, and sharing. Beairsto (1999) argues

that the Vuntut Gwich'in have faced major cultural and social changes since European

contact, but notions of leadership have remained consistent within the community (p. 4),

the same is true for Teetł'it Gwich'in. Teetł'it Gwich'in leaders are still expected to

possess leadership qualities that will ensure the survival for all the people, as well as their

individual families (p. 115).

In traditional Teetł'it Gwich'in governance practices, those chosen for leadership

demonstrate specific qualities that help the people live together. A leader is a good

speaker who embodies traditional knowledge and is someone chosen by the people to

lead. Before the introduction of the Indian Act's band council system, Teetł'it Gwich'in

people called such leaders 'headman', or *Dinjii Chit*,[11] which translates directly to 'man

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[11] Provided by Robert Alexie Sr., the translation means Dinjii: 'Man', Chit: 'One who is oldest in family they lead'

who is oldest in family leads,' rather than less substantial term, 'chief,' used today. Elder

Bertha Francis notes that the people governed themselves by selecting headmen:

> In every camp a bunch of people there was always one person that they look up
> to. And they use to call them 'headman' and that's the one guy knew everybody
> and told them what they were to do (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

According to Frank, becoming a leader also changed the roles of their wives. These

women were also well known and became leaders themselves, assisting the *Dinjii Chit*

(p. 70). Gwich'in sought specific characteristics in their leaders. They were expected to

have an intimate knowledge and respect of the land, they were expected to look after

other families and individuals, they were honest and hardworking, and had a strong sense

of responsibility to the community (p. 46-47). These values are important as they are

synonymous with being a good Gwich'in (p. 45). For the Teetł'it Gwich'in a leader was

chosen based on the qualities they exhibited in everyday life. Bertha Francis explains,

> It's [the leader] the way the person is…that's how they pick a person that speaks
> out, and is a good hunter, and knows life on the land. And they get that person to
> be the head of the group…because [if] you get a quiet person, you know there is
> not a whole lot they can do. But when you get somebody that speaks out and can
> say whatever he wants makes him a strong person amongst the group of people
> that they live in (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

 According to the elders, the chosen leader was a strong-willed individual who was also

an effective speaker and immersed in their traditional knowledge of the land. This was

necessary in order to appreciate the resource needs of the people, as most resources are

gathered or hunted from the land. Because the leader was ultimately responsible for

everyone, extensive land-based knowledge and skill in the individual leader was essential

to the survival of the people as a whole. The leader was also responsible for safeguarding

the people, making decisions that ensured the people were able to survive and live

together. Elder Alice Vittrekwa shared, these old leaders:

had power…his words, the chief's voice was powerful…and they didn't have law book. The law was right here [land]. If we're on a mountain and somebody came back and say there's caribou…the chief is going to speak and he'd pass the news and say there's caribou. He's the one who'd say tomorrow or tonight all the men gather and right away they'd go to him, and they'd decide, they'd plan how they're going to make that hunt. So there was a lot of respect for the chief because whatever he say, goes. If anything in the community goes wrong, he'd go there and start to fix it (Personal Interview, October 12, 2012).

These leaders had to demonstrate knowledge in different capacities because they had many different responsibilities as *Dinjii Chit* (Frank, 2011, p. 45; Beairsto, 1999, p. 149; Francis, Personal Interview, September 27, 2012). Integral to good leadership was the way in which the *Dinjii Chit* could lead the people in their activities on the land (Jerome, Personal Interview, October 6, 2012). Self-governance was practiced by taking the lead among the people especially during larger communal hunts in the winter (ibid; Frank, 2011, p. 35; Vittrekwa, Personal Interview, October 3, 2012). These leaders were responsible for ensuring success in hunting, and thus the supply of food that the people shared with one another (Frank, 2011, p. 35; Beairsto, 1999, p. 134). Leaders were expected to always make decisions in the best interest of the people and think of others before themselves. They were expected to observe cultural protocols and manage respectful relations that mitigated conflict between the people (Dene Nation, 1984; Colin, Personal Interview, September 30, 2012; Frank, 2011, p. 46-48). These activities were central to Teetł'it Gwich'in life, both politically and socially. The responsibility of *Dinjii Chit* was to ensure respectful practices among the people and with the other non-human beings they shared the landscape with; this is a central tenet of Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance. With these general responsibilities of leadership in mind, let us now turn to two key principles of Gwich'in leadership and self-government: respect and sharing.

Yiinjigwichidhoh' eh[12] -"Respect People, Respect Everything"

Traditional Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance determined how individuals were to act

toward everything in creation. Respect was critical in how Teetł'it Gwich'in were

expected to conduct themselves. This includes leaders and how they were treated. In the

past, Gwich'in leaders were deeply honoured with gifts of recognition to demonstrate

their importance among the people, showing their high status and importance to the

people (Frank 34). Respect is very important in Gwich'in culture. Elder Mary Effie

Snowshoe describes how her people apply respect in their lives: "They [Gwich'in] show

caring, sharing, loving, and respect. Respect was one of the biggest words for Gwich'in

people and they used to say *Yiinjigwichidhoh' eh*, means respect people" (Personal

Interview, October 3, 2012). Having respect for others is one of the highest principles in

Gwich'in self-governance and is instrumental in the way people conduct themselves as

individuals and in relation to others. Mary Effie also says that:

> Respect, is always in every part you know. …You have to have respect for the
> land, you have to have respect for the people, you have to have respect for the
> animals out here, and all what's on the land around you…Gwich'in people
> used to say respect yourself and then respect people around you and respect the
> land. You can't even go over here and cut the tree down for nothing. You got to
> make use of that tree before you cut it those days. That's how much people had
> respect for everything out on the land. And that made them strong (ibid).

The underlying teachings of Teetł'it Gwich'in governance show that it is a respect-driven

culture that guides individuals about how they must act with others and on the land.

Respect for all things in creation is a recognized Gwich'in value that evokes effective

leadership and governance (Frank, 2011, p. 46) and promotes a social ethos among the

people (Wishart, 2004, p. 198). Relationships with non-human beings and the land are

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[12] Translation provided by Mary Effie Snowshoe "to respect everything around you: people, the land, animals, air, birds, fish, plants, life all around you".

equally important; how the land provides life, the way in which animals are hunted for food and distributed among the people, how plants are harvested, all were done in a specific way to demonstrate respect and deemed to bring good luck (p. 197). An example of this is when I assisted an elder in harvesting juniper branches. She began by saying a prayer in the Gwich'in language, then she removed just enough 'medicine' from the plant that she needed, and left a few matches in the ground as an offering to the plant. The prayers and offering was her way of saying 'thank you' and showing respect for the medicines taken. All living and non-living need to be treated this way. Another example can be found in elder Bertha Francis explanation of the importance of respecting water:

> We were always taught to respect what we had out there. Always told, you have to respect people, the land, the water. They tell us that water is alive. It's a friend or could be an enemy to us but you have to respect it. And all these things they teach out there…you were taught all these things and you learn to respect it (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

Respect for non-human beings was also foundational to how traditional knowledge informed Gwich'in behaviour. Harvesting animals from the land was important and needed to be cared for right away to ensure no spoilage—the latter being the ultimate disrespect for an animal whose life was taken. According to Sarah Jerome, this showed respect to the land and its resources that was depended upon for survival:

> The land was so important it provided everything for us, our food, our clothing, our shelter…[if] we harvested any animals for food right away we were taught to clean…had to be done right away. Not only it was food for us but because the man of the house who went out to hunt or fish, he would be stronger if the woman of the house attended to that right away…just respect. That was the one thing that was taught to us was respect whatever was brought into our home from on the land (Personal Interview, October 6, 2012).

These actions show how much care, dedication and respect is utilized in both using and taking the lives of other beings to survive.

Respecting other people's use of the land was important not only for maintaining good inter-family relations but also to demonstrate respect for the property of other families. Sarah shared that her teachings for using another family's bush camp, required specific protocols:

> Everybody had camps out on the land. We never went in there and stole. When we came to a camp there was kindling there and there was wood there to make fire. It was just an unspoken rule that you replaced that when you left. Like everybody's cabin was open for the next person. And that was something that we were taught, respect (ibid).

The nature of how people respected each other, the living and non-living beings, the land, and their connections to land was instrumental for how governance was practiced among the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Respect is considered a guiding force and an important value in the way Gwich'in governed themselves.

Nihtatr'indaih -"To Give to Each Other"[13]

Like respect, sharing is a critical part of Gwich'in culture and an integral part of traditional self-governance (Frank, 2011, p. 46). In the past, hardship and food scarcity were events common to the people and they would share everything that they had, creating interdependence among the people. Gwich'in leaders had a particular responsibility for the social welfare of the people. It was customary for these leaders to lead community hunts and hold community feasts or potlatches to distribute the "wealth" of food or resources among the people (Frank, p. 35; Beairsto, 1999, p. 116; 134). This was a form of respect that ensured survival among the people, ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources. From his work with the Kluane First Nation in the Yukon, Paul

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[13] Translated provided from Teetl'it ts'at Gwichyah Gwich'in Ginjik Gwi'dinehtl'ee', Gwich'in Language Dictionary, 5th Edition, March 2005, p. 210.

Nadasdy (2003) articulates the importance of sharing as a cultural tradition within northern Dene societies: "Kluane people see the distribution of meat as an integral part of hunting itself, and this kind of reciprocity continues to be one of the organizing principals of Kluane social organization, enmeshing people in a web of reciprocal obligations and kinship ties" (p. 72). This aspect of sharing is also essential in Gwich'in culture. Today, the sharing of resources, especially food, continues to be practiced within the community at special events, like wedding celebrations and funerals. During her interview, Bertha Francis shared a story that was passed onto her when she was growing up that stressed the importance of sharing food with others:

> There were times where people were hungry. There were times where people had to bring something in and cook for people who never eat for long time…But people never gave up, they kept on struggling on and trying… I remember one old man talking about how he had to stay behind on the river with his grandmother, and people moved and he couldn't go because his grandmother was too old and he had to stay behind. And while those people are up in the mountains, he was getting all kinds of fish, he was getting rabbits. By the time those people were coming back, somebody came and said people were having hard time up there. Can't get caribou. Can't get anything. So, they all came back to his camp and he just gave everybody something. All the fish he had, rabbits, whatever he had, he shared all that with them (Personal Interview, September 27, 2012).

Sharing is a form of action fundamental to the political, social, and cultural fabric of Teetł'it Gwich'in culture. It was a way of demonstrating how Teetł'it Gwich'in were able to take care of their own people, ensuring both food security and economic redistribution of foodstuffs. Such practices were central to Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance making it possible for the people to be independent and free from outside authority. Today, sharing continues to be an important social value and an integral part of Teetł'it Gwich'in culture. According to Elder Sarah Jerome:

> Sharing is what we have. It was a communal kind of society that when we have someone that shot a moose, it was distributed throughout the community…so

whatever we got we share it. We never kept anything to ourselves (Personal Interview, October 6, 2012).

Teetł'it Gwich'in share resources with each other and look out for the welfare of others. These practices allow them to continue to live their own way of life, while nurturing a strong sense of freedom. A deep respect for the land and other beings and sharing of resources with those in need are common and necessary traits of Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance.

These cultural traits are key elements of land-based governance that weave social and political relationships among the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Elder Mary Effie Snowshoe demonstrates this connection when describing how self-government is practiced by two families helping each other while living on the land. On the land, Gwich'in acknowledge familial land boundaries, but they also come together in times of need. They assist each another when necessary and share resources harvested from the land. She explains using her father's family and the Vittrekwa's:

> They used to stay 32 miles up the Peel and they stay up there and my dad many times would repeat himself and say 'ok, we going to be trapping these lakes and you use only these lakes, and this lake goes this way, there's lots of lakes out this way. William Vittrekwa is going to be using that and I don't want you people getting into there and think you are going to be trapping in that area. I don't want that' So he make it very clear to us and we'll use one trail until we split up and William Vittrekwa goes this way and Pascal [family] goes this way. And that's for trapping, hunting and there's times that my dad and William Vittrekwa will be hunting together and they be going to be travelling together out on the land…if my dad shot moose, he'll just take a certain part…over to old William Vittrekwa's family. If William Vittrekwa shot a moose that the same thing again. So there they share. It doesn't matter what they get. They get beaver, they get geese, ducks, they cook and they would share with one another (Personal Interview, October 3, 2012).

Mary Effie's illustration of how her family and the Vittrekwa's would share resources, and support other families, portrays how families lived their traditional governance based

on foundations of respect, sharing, and taking care of each other while on the land. These

practices allow families to subsist and survive throughout the year.

In light of the instrumentality of sharing and respect in how Teetł'it Gwich'in

families worked together, what many elders referred to as the "white man government"

was very foreign to their way of doing things (Robert Alexie Sr., Personal Interview,

October 8, 2012; Bertha Francis, Personal Interview, September 27, 2012; Mary Effie

Snowshoe, Personal Interview, October 3, 2012). Likewise, Frank argues that

westernized forms of government and leadership do not easily fit with traditional

Gwich'in social and political values. Frank writes, "[t]hey now hold meetings and have

agendas. They no longer use a talking stick that is colourful with eagle feathers tied to it.

Even when there is a talking stick, other people do not respect the person with the talking

stick. When I was a child, I remember no one was allowed to stand up and speak until it

was their turn" (p. 36). The Gwich'in have protocols of their own that enabled them to

exercise their self-governance in a culturally and politically relevant way. Robert Alexie

Sr. states that long before any outside influence Teetł'it Gwich'in had their own ways of

looking after one another and making a living for themselves, as they still have the

capacity to do. This was instrumental to their practice of self-governance:

> Them days nobody know the government. We, as Gwich'in peoples, look after
> our own people. Everybody look after one another. I said we had one chief only
> and he was here and there, not with everybody but you know when peoples used
> to go out there on the land and have to make their living and do work for
> themselves (Personal Interview, October 8, 2012).

Being self-sufficient on the land enabled the Teetł'it Gwich'in to live as a self-governing

people, as they were not dependent on anyone else to survive. They were strong, self-

sufficient, and able to look after their own. Teetł'it Gwich'in had multiple ways of

governing themselves that acted in the interest of their people as guided by ancestral

teachings. Elder Sarah Jerome pointed out Teetł'it Gwich'in governance has its own way

of holding people responsible for their actions:

> Prior to the Europeans coming in, we had our own self-government. We had our own set of rules and how to deal with crime. We had no alcohol, we had no drugs, we had no crime, and if an individual as much as did something they weren't suppose to do according to code of ethics of the Gwich'in people, right now the headman would go over there and deal with [it]…Those days they banished people…if you don't shape up you were shipped out or banished…justice system was in place. There was no income support, welfare system because as communally we took care of everybody…There was no such thing as crime because it was dealt with on an individual basis and I know that Chief Julius took it upon himself to go around and counsel people (Personal Interview, October 6, 2012).

Sarah's point provides insight on how independent Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance was

prior to the implementation of the *Indian Act* band council system. Teetł'it Gwich'in

were in charge of their own affairs and had systems in place that dealt with matters that

had arisen among the people. Such systems were able to function because the people's

family connections allowed them to solve problems collectively:

> Our own government, it was understood. It was taught to us through everyday activities. Anything and everything we did it was taught to us (ibid).

Whether as individuals or large family groups, the Teetł'it Gwich'in understood their

laws while also demonstrating respect for the governance systems rooted in their land-

based way of life.

The elders all noted how Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance is based on a

collective understanding of mutual respect and sharing among the people. With a system

of their own, principles of respect and reciprocity informed how families looked after one

another within their traditional lands made what is Teetł'it Gwich'in governance. These

principles were enacted through land-based activities and the sharing of resources

necessary for survival with a deep level of respect. These characteristics were instrumental to the practice of self-governance among the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Land was essential for defining ways in which to govern themselves, as the experience living off of it, taught people how to live among each other. Asserting Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance through their own cultural and social practices made the people strong. By practicing their Indigeneity through their own modes of traditional governance Teetł'it Gwich'in are able to be self-governing based on their own cultural and spiritual practices embedded within the land.

Nan Ts'at Sriigwandaii K'it Gwiidandaih - "We Live Healthy By The Land"
Having access to the land is essential in maintaining an Indigenous connection to Teetł'it Gwich'in cultural practices. The Teetł'it Gwich'in elders believe that by living life on the land and access to their traditional food sources provides a positive, healthy lifestyle that is beneficial to the physical and cultural wellness of their people. Their cultural teachings and practices are intrinsically tied to their lands. For example, Peter Loovers (2010) describes that language is important to the Teetł'it Gwich'in because it holds intricate meanings from their worldviews and the social interaction it provides brings happiness to elders that are able to speak it because to them the language is alive (p. 179). However, due to a number of influences the language has been in decline over the past forty years. Loovers states that an important factor on the issue of language loss is connecting it to land use and the removal of Gwich'in from it. Part of this is the transition from life on the land into the permanent settlement: "Language is intimately woven together with the land and is therefore crucially affected by the move from bush to town" (p. 182). Language

use is a form of cultural practice that has a direct relationship to land, the land is crucial to the Teetł'it Gwich'in as the elders continually stress its importance because it represents and ensures the livelihood of their people. Without their land and of their connections to it, like language, the elders suggest the Teetł'it Gwich'in are nothing without it.

An important component to maintaining one's connection to land is the ability to live on it. Indigenous peoples connections to their food systems is directly linked to their identity, their relationship to their lands, and the social connections that emerges from these interconnecting relationships (Nadasdy, 2003, p. 76). Land-based living is demanding work, but is also important to the physical and emotional health of Teetł'it Gwich'in, as previously mentioned by the elders. This land-based healthiness also contributes to the practice of Teetł'it Gwich'in self-governance. As previously noted, Teetł'it Gwich'in land-based practice is often seen as *gwiinzii kwùndei* or "the good life" (Loovers, 2010, p. 219). Subsistence harvesting is a critical aspect of Gwich'in self-governance and one that is still practiced in Teetł'it Gwich'in culture. By maintaining their access to bush foods, like fishing, berry picking, hunting (especially caribou and moose), Teetł'it Gwich'in families provide healthy and culturally sustaining foods for themselves and their families. These practices keep Gwich'in values of sharing and respect alive that is central to the practice of self-governance. Key to this practice is the continuation of traditional diets that are vital to the cultural and physical well-being of the people and that maintain relationships with the land and other beings that live on it. These relationships are particularly important for the elders who repeatedly stated that this way of life is key to emotional and physical health. In her interview, Elder Mary Effie

Snowshoe described how important traditional subsistence activities are to the Teetł'it

Gwich'in:

> You never hear people getting sick, you never hear nothing about cancer. We don't know nothing about cancer. Nobody get sick. Buts that's important. It's important out there because we get all our wild meat out there and we get our food out there (Personal Interview, October 3, 2012).

Living life on the land contributes to the health of the people. A significant part of this

process is maintaining access to traditional food and medicinal plant practices that are

vital to the practice of Indigeneity and Teetł'it Gwich'in self- governance. The land

provides many health benefits, including physical exercise, spiritual connection to the

territory and the multitude of beings that live on it, and the everyday use of traditional

plant medicines. Mary Effie describes what work at a Teetł'it Gwich'in bush camp is

like:

> It's so healthy life. We don't live in house. We live in tent. We don't have plywood for floor, we'll get out and cut tree down and get all the brush [spruce bough] off it and set brush in there. And set our stove in there and get dry wood. And once you make your fire you gonna have good smell from the brush just all inside that tent…I think to myself that was so healthy. And the fire burning, good wood, has lots of spruce gum [sap] in it and you can smell that too, it's in the tent. That spruce gum is supposed to be medicine, traditional medicine. The brush [spruce bough] is traditional medicine. We sleep on it. Everyday we live and sit on that brush [spruce bough]. Our fire is going. We cook on there. Every time we go and put wood on that stove, you open the stove then smoke comes out and it's from that good wood. Good clean wood. Dry wood, healthy. So those days you never hear people getting sick. Never hear about cancer…Everyday people were healthy because on the land it's so healthy life out there (ibid).

Bush life provides a very healthy environment that enriched the health outcomes of the

people, especially when combined with the health benefits of traditional foods and plant

medicines. Traditional foods and medicines are seen by the elders as nurturing in a way

that store-bought foods are not, these traditional foods have the added benefit of requiring

physical labour to harvest them as well as reviving traditional familial relationships and

responsibilities (Bertha Francis, Personal Interview, September 27, 2012). The land is the

basis of their cultural practice and teachings, but also the root of their physical health.

For elder Bertha Francis the land is essential to the physical well-being of her people. She

remembers growing up feeling healthy and whole:

> As a Teetł'it Gwich'in, I think [the land] is really important because as far back as
> I could remember people lived up here, and the air was clean, the land was
> clean…we had good clean food, caribou, moose, beavers, rabbits, ptarmigan,
> whatever we could have, we had. And we don't eat only what we cook, we drink
> the broth too and that's how we stayed fit. We never had any kind of weight
> problems like people are having today. We were active out there. Even as
> children our parents made sure we had a good breakfast, they dress us up warm,
> let us play outside. We had good fresh air all day, by dinner time we come in, we
> have something to eat and we are out again. And we play out in the good fresh
> air. And by night time, we are all just in and we have a good sleep. No noise,
> nobody disturbing anybody. It's just quiet. Good life out there (ibid).

Life on the land for families like Bertha or Mary Effie's provided many healthy benefits

due to physical activity, ensuring wellness among the people. Today, this physical work

not only keeps the elders in shape, but also brings emotional fulfillment in performing

cultural activities. It is what keeps them active, adds a form of continually in their

everyday cultural duties and responsibilities within their household. Some elders feel

that there is also a significant cultural difference between living in the settlement and

living on the land. For elder Elizabeth Colin, being at her cabin outside the community

brings her wellness and offers her a sense of freedom. She also stresses the importance

of having access to country foods is vital for her ability to be self-sufficient and self-

governing. Healthy living on the land at their cabins provides clean air, clean water and

foods, physical activity, and a sense of wholeness of living life on and with the land,

living *gwiinzii kwùndei*. It also involves being able to harvest, hunt and prepare their

traditional foods. Elizabeth shared that she is:

still not used to store food. I have to have my own food yet. When I don't eat my food, I am hungry all the time. When I come up here to my cabin out on the land, the minute I walk in I just feel so good. Right now first thing if I have something, carry something with me right now I cook it the way I want on the wood stove, not on that electric range but wood stove. Food taste so different when you cook it on the woodstove than on that range. When they get caribou or fish or rabbit, right away now, we fix it up. That's what I do. It's to try to work and look after the food that I get. If I am going to be out here and I don't have a cold place I dry it. I dry the meat and so that it don't get spoiled. So, I think by living out on the land and living in town, we know what we have to do when we are out here on the land and our life is different in Fort McPherson because you know everything is electricity and out here is not. We still live the old way, which is good for me. More work but it is good (Personal Interview, September 30, 2012).

Life on the land provides the simple necessities of being in a culturally rooted atmosphere. Elizabeth's daily duties revolve around her cultural lifestyle by working with all the elements of the land. She feels at home being in her cabin and performing her daily routine of land-based activities away from the conveniences of modern life. Living life on the land contributes to the physical, cultural wellness of Teetł'it Gwich'in. With the high rate of heart diseases and diabetes, Indigenous people's connection to their lands and cultural food practices are vital to their physical and emotional health. For Rebecca[14] continuing her traditional activities, like moose hide tanning and making caribou dry meat, are skills that are directly tied to maintaining physical and emotional health. She chooses to live life on the land when it is possible to be physically healthy, but also to maintain her connection to the traditional lifestyle to which she is accustomed:

I'd stay here and do the stuff I'd like to do everyday. I'll dry meat and I'll tan my skin[15] and I'll go out and collect wood. I'm not strong now. I'm used to doing those things but I could still do this where nobody is going to tell me to do this, do that. But we can't live the white man way. Not with our food (Personal Interview, October 5, 2012).

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[14] Real name was not used due to participant request to remain anonymous. Instead the name 'Rebecca' was chosen and will be used to protect the identity of the participant.

[15] Caribou and moose hides

Rebecca's insight on maintaining her physical and cultural health intact through traditional foods and other subsistence activities is important as it keeps her connected with the cultural and physical activities that keep her independent and free. With the high rates of diabetes and heart disease among the Indigenous populations in Canada (see Reading, 2009, p. 79), keeping a connection to traditional diets is key for individuals to live healthy lives. Rebecca believes that her way of living outside of non-Indigenous influence, including a diet based on traditional foods is healthier for her both spiritually and culturally.

Teetł'it Gwich'in life on the land is a healthy environment that brings wellness to the people. For the elders practicing this they are performing their individual governance, maintaining connections of their lands and keeping their cultural traditions alive. By eating a traditional diet that is land-based with physical activity they are able to be strong and healthy. This is instrumental because wellness contributes to the health of the nation. The subsistence practices of the Teetł'it Gwich'in enables them to be free as these practices are central to Gwich'in self-sufficiency and self-governance. These activities allow Teetł'it Gwich'in to harnesses the ability for the people to live their culture, be who they are, and to define their collective self-governance as a people. In essence by being healthy in all aspects of their physical and cultural selves, they are engaging in self-governance practices, thus ensuring and maintaining their self-determination among their people.

Nankak Srinatr'ilii Gwizhit Goo'aii -"Land is a Place of Healing"

Being on the land is a central component to the spirituality of the Teetł'it Gwich'in. Through ensuring healthy land-based relationships, Teetł'it Gwich'in

spirituality is central to their connections to land and cultural ways of life. By being on

the land, Teetł'it Gwich'in connect to cultural practices and traditions that have been in

existence for thousands of years. The land provides a basis for inter-connections among

people and the other beings that live on it that creates a spiritual balance from these

connections. Like the cycle of changing seasons, Teetł'it Gwich'in life has a momentum

encircling the cultural activities that is guided by the changing landscape that nonetheless

offers a sense of continuity which enables healing (Loovers, 2010, p. 221). Elder Sarah

Jerome feels that the land provides the physical and spiritual needs that are central to the

wellbeing of her people. She describes how unique and necessary the land and people are

to maintaining their connections to each other. She shares:

> Physical and spiritual wellbeing comes from the land…Everything we did was
> physical, even going down to the river and getting water for our drinking water,
> for our cooking, for washing the night before…So being on the land kept us
> physically fit…spiritually we're out on the land where it is so nice and quiet. Lots
> of people go out to quiet places to meditate today. We didn't have to do that. It's
> on the land…You look out and you see the wonders of the universe and the earth
> and what the Lord has provided for us, its right here out on the land (Personal
> Interview, October 6, 2012).

As previously mentioned, for the Teetł'it Gwich'in the land fulfills the physical and

spiritual needs of the people connecting them to the land, and re-establishing their

identity as 'the people of the head-waters.' Knowledge of the land's particular localities

and how to practice cultural knowledge and skills on it, is vitally important when

ensuring that these understandings are passed onto the next generation. Teetł'it Gwich'in

lands are sites where Teetł'it Gwich'in can reclaim their culture while maintaining

stewardship of the land. These activities are mutually reinforcing and allow individual

Teetł'it Gwich'in to revive cultural connections to their homeland. Particular localities,

such as family camps, on Teetł'it Gwich'in lands acts as a cultural maker for their

physical, cultural and spiritual healing, especially as these sites hold important childhood

memories for many Teetł'it Gwich'in. For Sarah, her path to grieving a death in her

family was to remember her childhood upbringing by returning to her parent's cabin.

Being in a place where she was raised by her parents, grandparents with her siblings, she

described this locality as a "healthy, positive, enthusiastic environment that we grew up

in" (ibid), and a site of strong cultural connections for generations in her family. She

needed to escape the daily life of the community and grieve for her cousin who had

passed away. She spent three days at the camp and sought help from the land that raised

her:

> When you come to a place where you had spent so much happiness, so many
> beautiful things that were instilled into the way you think, the way you live, the
> way you were treated by your parents, it was such safe, happy,
> environment…that's the kind of impact that we get from our parents, our
> grandparents, and it's in a place (ibid).

Her time at the site helped Sarah to come to terms with the death of her cousin, finding

the strength to carry on from the land and the memories associated with that particular

site. For her, the land that she was raised on provided many positive and healthy

memories of her childhood. Returning to life on the land is an integral component of

healing and necessary practice of self-governance in its most autonomous form.

Therefore, healing through life on the land is a central component of their self-

governance and practice of self-determination among the Teetł'it Gwich'in people.

Conclusion

The stories shared by the Teetł'it Gwich'in elders illustrates the unique relationship they

have with their lands through their traditional knowledge that is tied to their land-based

practices. Life on the land has always been a very important part of the lives of the elders and there are many who prefer to live this land-based lifestyle maintaining connections to their practices of Indigeneity. Central to their ways of life, the teaching and perspectives that they share during their interviews demonstrates how interconnected personal and familial relationships are among their people. By being connected to their lands and its resources, these relationships allow for the expression of land and self-governance practices that are integral to Teetł'it Gwich'in ways of being. As part of conceptualizing Indigeneity, the traditional governance practices and teachings comes in the form of people showing respect for all things, sharing of resources to help others, and notions of leadership guided in cultural traditions guides the Teetł'it Gwich'in sense of freedom. Other governing practices described during the interviews are deeply rooted in family groups living on the land. These practices are also grounded in notions of respect, the sharing of resources, and values of leadership. Their culture is intimately tied to their physical landscapes that demonstrate how their land can offer healing among the people. As cultural practices and traditional knowledge is still very much alive among the Teetł'it Gwich'in, many elders still see the importance of land-based living and a return to traditional diets for social, cultural, and spiritual wellness.

The views of the Teetł'it Gwich'in elders provide glimpses of their Indigeneity and worldview that is unique and can add significantly to larger discourses on the importance of Indigeneity. As the elders have pointed out, Teetł'it Gwich'in ways of being and self-governance practices have existed well before the influence of Canada. Their self-governance enabled individuals to be independent, but remain part of the larger

collectivity and family units on the land. Their stories demonstrate they were self-governing and free by being on the land and practicing their Indigeneity.

Conclusion

This thesis project set out to reveal the importance of Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity by affirming the Teetł'it Gwich'in philosophical worldview that is grounded in land-based traditions central to Teetł'it Gwich'in identity, culture, and self-governance. This thesis argues that practices of Indigeneity are vital for understanding Teetł'it Gwich'in self-determination, providing an alternative to state-based forms of governance. Stories from Teetł'it Gwich'in elders provide a glimpse of the importance of practices of Indigeneity, which makes self-governance possible. Gwich'in self-governance is based upon land-based practices and teachings rooted in traditional knowledge that contributes to physical, spiritual, and cultural wellness as well as political freedom. The Teetł'it Gwich'in connection to the land, and the relationships that arise from it, influences how Teetł'it Gwich'in govern themselves outside of state authority. It is through these practices of Indigeneity that Teetł'it Gwich'in can safeguard their political freedom and carry on their cultural, physical and spiritual traditions that are woven together. By utilizing these practices of Indigeneity, Teetł'it Gwich'in are not necessarily consciously challenging state authority, but have nonetheless created spaces to maintain their political freedom that is crucial for them to be Teetł'it Gwich'in. It is important to point out that while Indigeneity may exist only as a tool in relation to the state, it should be understood as a force that defines, reproduces and maintain Indigenous peoples, like the Teetł'it Gwich'in, as a self-governing people.

The narratives as expressed by Teetł'it Gwich'in elders explains how Teetł'it Gwich'in self-determination stems from social, physical, and cultural connections to land guiding the practice of their land-based governance as informed by ancestral knowledge.

These narratives bring out the elders' experiences practicing Indigeneity and the relationships resulting from these acts. One of the relationships that demonstrate the unique worldviews of the Teetł'it Gwich'in through their practices of Indigeneity is with the Canadian state. It is political due to Canada's desire to control and assimilate the Teetł'it Gwich'in into the settler society. As described in this thesis, the relationship exists in two ways. One, through the contemporary treaty relations found within the Gwich'in Land Claim Agreement and of how the state stipulates a range of incentives in making the Gwich'in assimilate as citizens into settler society. Two, from the introduction of various policies: such as the *Indian Act* band council system that changed Teetł'it Gwich'in notions of traditional governance and leadership; and government-sponsored housing programs and residential schools, that destabilized Gwich'in livelihoods by severing their connections to land. As the TRC final report unveiled Canada's residential school policy is best described as 'cultural genocide' (p.1) and that meaningful reconciliation in Canada needs to address, acknowledge, and understand the 'complex' legacy of residential schools (184). The elders described the impacts of these policies and the importance of Teetł'it Gwich'in practicing their Indigeneity for maintaining their connections to land, their powers of self-governance as well as their spiritual, cultural, and physical wellness. This is vital because wellness contributes to the health of the people. Without their land, they are not able to practice the many components of their Indigeneity that make up their spiritual and communal lives. Practicing their land-based way of life by hunting and living outside state constructs, Teetł'it Gwich'in are practicing an autonomous form of sufficiency and self-governance. They are free from any outside interference by living a free and healthy life on the land.

In essence, being healthy in all aspects of their physical and cultural lives, allowing them to engage in self-governance practices and ensuring some level of self-determination among their people, even in a colonial setting.

The range of topics that elders touched on was central to this project. Discussions of on the land living, cultural and spiritual wellness, traditional leadership and processes of governance all facilitate toward the notion of *gwiinzii kwùndei*, the good life (Loovers, 2010, p. 199). On the land living seems to inspire the elders in describing their culturally rich lives and what it was like growing up from the land. During my time with the elders I sensed a great love for living a land-based lifestyle, but a greater yearning for the need to go back to it due to the immense social change they have seen in their lifetimes. What is important about the stories they shared is how recently Teetł'it Gwich'in lived a self-sufficient bush-based way of life, and that the practices they describe are still in existence among families in the community. It is also a way of life that is still within reach for most Teetł'it Gwich'in as the elders still possess this knowledge. The real danger echoing in their call to reignite Gwich'in cultural living is the number of young people losing their connections to the land, severing the teachings associated with the responsibilities for maintaining Gwich'in relationships with the land and with our non-human relatives.

Even though elders touched upon very compelling topics in these interviews, there is more traditional knowledge about Teetł'it Gwich'in knowledge and philosophy that I could have explored here. I feel that the interviews I conducted with my elders only scraped the surface of the importance of our land-based cultural practices and forms of Teetł'it Gwich'in governance through notions of traditional leadership, principals of

sharing, and reciprocity. There were many other ways in which I can describe Teetł'it Gwich'in governance, but I was limited in the scope of this project. However, this does demonstrate that immense knowledge exists in Gwich'in communities that can further articulate the many ways Teetł'it Gwich'in governance can be practiced. If I was able to carry on further with this project I would be interested in uncovering storied practices found within our narratives that can act as Gwich'in laws; and of how state-imposed boundaries affects traditional self governance and the relationships among families. By better understanding Teetł'it Gwich'in experiences of cultural loss and assimilation and its impact on governance, I am inspired to continue this work with the youth of Teetł'it Zheh. I want to use my skills and knowledge to give back to my community by generating awareness on issues of cultural resurgence through land-based projects, invoking our Gwich'in philosophy of governance to help myself be a stronger Teetł'it Gwich'in.

My time spent with elders in learning about Teetł'it Gwich'in governance was empowering, rewarding and provided me with a deeper understanding of my people's ways of relating to the land and the many relationships that arise from these connections. It was eye opening to learn of the cultural effects of the experiences with early government policies on the elders, and the successes and failures of severing the Gwich'in connection to our lands. For instance, although I didn't anticipate it, the effects of residential school identified by the elders was how they conceptualize their relationship to the Canadian state, which in practice they associated with land removal and cultural loss. My research experience enabled me to learn of the critical importance of having access to a land-base alongside traditional cultural practices and teachings, both

of which is crucial to the future survival of the Teetł'it Gwich'in people. Part of this understanding stems from the importance of our land and culture for Teetł'it Gwich'in practices of Indigeneity articulated by the notion of *Nakhwanh Gwich'in Khehłok Iidilii*, we are our own people by governing ourselves. By having Teetł'it Gwich'in people on the land, living our culture, generating physical, cultural and spiritual wellness from land-based practices, and invoking our Gwich'in philosophy by fostering our own sense of *self*-governance as a people is our practice of self-determination. This makes us Teetł'it Gwich'in, by generating our own governance by awakening and reviving our own laws and systems of governance guided by our own philosophies. This is our form of governance that exists outside state power and authority. We are living and being ourselves on the land by practicing the cultural traditions of our ancestors. The underlying message from Teetł'it Gwich'in elders about our ways of life is the land is very much a part of my people's history and can teach Teetł'it Gwich'in philosophy because this comes from our land-based existence.

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