

SAHTÚ GODÉ DÁHK'É PLACE OF STORIES

Ts'ódune Táh Ts'ede Tł'q PACKING THE BABY

By Alfred Masuzumi

We can't go back to the traditional way of life. But what we can do is analyze our situation and find ways to adapt our traditions to modern life.

This is something we all need to do together. We need to write down our views and experiences. We can then use our writings as a starting point for honest discussion. But most importantly, we need to find ways to take responsibility for our words. Our children are watching us.

The elders say that if you carry your babies in your arms, you are spoiling them. Pack your babies on your back, and they will look over your shoulder and observe you working with your hands. They will be motivated to use their hands to work for themselves.

They'll watch how you cut the meat for dry meat.
They'll watch how you change the spruce bough floor.
They'll watch you preparing supper.
They'll watch you sewing.

One day my elder teacher told me, "You are going to be a bad person when you grow up." Choosing my words carefully, I asked, "What should I do to become a good person?"

He said, "Don't keep anything to yourself. If you can't talk about something with your parents, talk about it with some other elders, or with your friends. As the old saying goes, 'Quiet people, who keep to themselves, must have something bad brewing inside them.'"

I hope that over the coming months and years many new writers of all kinds - women, men, youth, elders, Dene, Mòla - will be published in this Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é. This will be a place where all kinds of different ways of understanding our region can be shared.

Alfred Masuzumi is an artist and writer living in Fort Good Hope. His first book, Caribou Hide, was published last year by Raven Rock Publishing (Yellowknife).



This painting tells a story of long ago, when no one knew how people aged. An old woman was always out and about with her back-pack, and she drew the curiosity of the people because her pack was always filled! No one knew what she had in it.

One day the people planned to have a little girl pretending to visit and play in the old woman's teepee. While the old woman turned her back toward the little girl, the girl peeked in the back-pack and found that it was filled with human muscles. Then the people realized how people aged. For the old woman was stealthily pulling the sinew of youth out of people.

Becoming a Field Worker

Many people in the Sahtu communities have had the experience of loss that came with years of exile at residential schools. This caused a break in the chain of knowledge passed from generation to generation since time immemorial. Because of this, the role of traditional knowledge research has become extremely important. Younger people are now relearning how to communicate with their elders, and through the elders they are rediscovering their roots. Bella T'Seleie has been a fieldworker in traditional knowledge research for over twenty years. Her experience is useful to all who wish to understand Dene ways. The following is taken from materials developed for the Sahtu Land Use Planning Board.

THE SEARCH

These are my experiences leading up to becoming a researcher, collecting and documenting the Dene culture.

It all started when I was nineteen. I can't say I was a very balanced young person. In fact I was in a major state of confusion, feeling very displaced. Here I was, nineteen years old, with little or no skills to function in the world. My connection with the land had been broken with the many years that I had been in residential school. I knew all the camp sites where I had lived with my adopted parents, and I knew where certain events had taken place. But after a certain point it became a blur of mixed-up information.

Five years earlier, when I had taken a year off to live on the land with my parents, I didn't know how to do anything but comb my hair, dress, and make my bed, because that's all we had to do at the residential school. It was a very hard year, to say the least. I would have felt much better if I had known then that I could relearn all the knowledge I was lacking.

Years later, I realised that I needed help. I missed my parents a great deal, but they were too far away to be with. Suddenly I just wanted to be with elders.

I decided I would go to the most powerful elder and visit him and his wife every day. He was a well-known and very respected medicine man. I had serious doubts that he would give a kid like me the time of day, so it took me awhile to work up my nerve.

Then one morning I went to visit them, and told them how I was feeling lost and confused. They looked at me with tender concern. He asked what he could do to help me. I asked if I could continue to visit him and he could tell me stories. He was delighted with this answer, because he said that his stories were what were keeping him alive. I spent many days with these wonderful elders. I even walked the three miles on the shore to their fish camp when they moved to Rabbitskin River.

Slowly the different information that did not seem to have roots before started to fit together like a puzzle.

It was like a prayer coming true for me when I was hired to work on collecting place names. I thought that it was a simple job to collect this information, but boy was I wrong! Tons of information, stories, legends, events that took place at a specific place started to pour in! I was not too sure what to do with all this information at first.

I soon realised that for the first time we were creating a big picture. The stories that were once just floating around in my mind were slowly taking root some place or other on the map. The people in these stories were becoming more real! All of this knowledge filled the void that I had been feeling. I finally realised that no knowledge, Dene or Mòla, is beyond our reach. We just need to work toward what we want to know.

DENE PROTOCOL

I can't say that all the field projects I worked on were a success. For example, when the land selection began for the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim process, I couldn't get the project off the ground in Fort Good Hope and Colville Lake. I became very discouraged.

Now, years later, we can all see that no one person could have completed this project - not even a superman! The communities had to form teams of people who finally finished the project. We've learned from this experience traditional knowledge involves the whole community. No one person should have to shoulder responsibility for it.

NAMES

It's okay for Mòla visitors to call people by their first name, but it's not polite for a Dene person, especially a young person, to use a person's name in their presence. It's best to ask, "How are we related?" and use the kinship terms instead.

Elders like to see young people aware of these things. They will recite some family tree to show where the family tie took place. In an informal way family his-

AGE

by Alfred Masuzumi



tory is being recorded. The elders know people from generations back.

When interviewing elders it's good to listen, slow down to their pace and let them talk. Remember – not too many years back, they lived in a total different environment from what it is today.

To me it looks like we're still in some sort of transition between the two cultures. People are going back and forth between two very different cultures, with very different concepts. This is where it pays off to understand both the Dene and Mola languages.

Because of weakness and breakdown of the Dene language, many elders and youth are alienated from one another. They both want to communicate, but can't. Many young people feel displaced, and are unable to balance the two cultures or even make sense of them.

The main reason the Dene offer information is so that it can be passed on to young people. This is a big responsibility!

LISTENING

The elders talk slowly, creating a picture, repeating things twice in legend telling style. They need a verbal response every few minutes. A story or a teaching is not complete without the response of the person listening. The listener would say "heh-eh" every few minutes. This is different from communicating and storytelling in the Mola way, where it's polite to remain completely silent, keeping eye contact.

Sometimes the elder will lose the spirit of the story if interrupted or distracted. Some stories are like songs being recited and take deep concentration by the storyteller. This is why some elders tell their stories in a singsong tone.

There are rules about passing on personal events and legends as accurately as possible. Dene people had a "truth protocol" too. Some traditional people are trained to say very little but with all kinds of background meaning. Sometimes a Dene will talk all around the subject and never reveal their thoughts or feelings completely. They give indications of what they mean, so it becomes difficult to translate into Mola concepts – these always need to be clearly said and measured or fitted into something, so there's no guessing. There are all kinds of differences from the Mola way of passing on information.

Before I learn anything I simply listen more carefully to everything. Stories and history are recited in a way to encourage independent thinking and problem solving. The stories are not defined for anyone. You have to do it for yourself.

This way of thinking stems from the way the Dene have a holistic view. Everything about the Dene culture interconnects and intertwines. Spirituality is connected to everyday living when traditional rules on wildlife and how we related to one another are used. Sharing is the biggest rule people follow. Some people don't like it when their tea offering is turned down.

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entered the house.

Some traditional people are silent out of respect. Even older people pay respect to their elders; they become modest and quiet in the other person's presence. Some sisters are shy to express themselves in front of their brothers.

People's life stories are sensitive. There were so many hardships in the past. They grieve for the independence and freedom they lost. This makes them silent and withdrawn at times.

Elders don't seem to like a person that chit chats too much and don't present a calm attitude. They complain it mixes them up and often think the person should be mature enough to communicate properly.

PITCHING IN

The first day when I visit a person to set up an interview time, I join into their everyday activity. If they are still doing chores, like bringing in firewood or making dry fish or meat, I pitch in to help. Only afterward do I ask to listen to their stories. I spend time helping with something, or have a meal and tea with them. By the time the interview time rolls around, we are more relaxed with one another.

The best way to get hands on training from elders is to participate in their hobbies, like moose-hide tanning and preserving food. I notice all of these skills they were willing to teach me – but not if I just sit there. Or they tell me stories while we work, so that they can have a productive day and teach me what I want to know. Elders see knowledge as true wealth.

The more advanced a person is in knowing their culture, the more it encourages an elder to teach them. They take pride in their youth to value these things. The more you know, the more it opens up communication, and the more advanced the teaching.

RESPECT

I make sure I'm considerate to people, young or elderly, because I'm taking their time. I'm digging into their knowledge, which is a part of their spirit.

Bella T'Seleie

The Dene like jokes and laughing. Elders like jokes that are of good humour and taste. Gossipy and hurtful information is avoided or not responded to. If the person stops indicating by saying "heh-eh," this is a sign that the person is not comfortable about the subject. If they change the subject, go with it.

Interrupting is hard to do, and shouldn't be done except to ask questions. It's never proper to contradict what someone is saying. These things can be done in other more positive ways. I follow this rule even if the information is different as night and day.

SILENCES

People have a certain relationship protocol with others. This traditional practice is still carried on. If the person seems to withdraw and talk less, it may be that they are observing a rule in relationship to someone who



Sometimes there are slight disagreements, which makes it even more interesting. It's not important to win the disagreement as long as you learn something about what they're saying. It's very interesting because you get to talk to all kinds of people. You learn a lot listening to views that look at some things from all different and interesting ways and directions.

Don't get caught up in the gossip game. The real Dene way is if you have to say something about a person, you'll have to repeat to their face what you said in their absence. It's not a good thing to say something, then have the person hear it from someone else.

A TREASURE

Attitude is everything. If we treat our culture as a treasure, and promote Dene culture and teachings, it will be far more respected and valued. Sometime it might become a movement that is positive for everyone.

For example in the 60's, it was not popular to be a Dene. Everyone wanted to be modern. A deep shame of culture and self was what caused this negative movement. Anything too native or traditional was rejected by many. Parents spoke to their children in broken English rather than teach their Dene language to their young. Many negative and derogatory remarks were made, and the youth caught on to it.

This attitude started in the late 50's and was strong in the 60's. Children who came from traditional backgrounds were not accepted too well by the nuns and teachers at the residential school. They put up with torment from their own peers who felt they were more advanced in Mola living and knowledge, and thought they were higher class people. It looks like it will still take a few more generations before people can be healed from the effects of residential school.

It's good to be aware of this background information, because these are issues that people were dealing with and are still doing so. Keep up with past and current events, because they're all related.

Bella T'Seleie has recently returned to Fort Good Hope after completing her second year in Native Studies at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. This year she received an award for a study of the traditional organisational structures of the K'ahsho Got'ine Dene. T'Seleie is now working on a community-based traditional and scientific knowledge inventory for the Sahtu Land Use Planning Board.

Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é/Place of Stories

READING, WRITING AND ART IN THE

It has been my privilege to travel throughout the communities of the Sahtu region, meeting hundreds of wonderful people as a part of my work over the past year. In the process I discovered an astonishing number of people who have been creating images of their world – through prose and poetry, through photography, through painting or sculpture.

A tiny fraction of these people have gained public recognition. But the creativity of most has until now remained a private affair. Theirs is a labour of love.

It is my hope that this new supplement to the Mackenzie Valley Viewer, *Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é/Place of Stories* will in a small way help to build a body of recognised writers and artists in the Sahtu region. And, in turn, it will build an audience that learns to see the people and land of the Sahtu in a new light through the medium of words and images.

The timing is ideal, since the Sahtu Divisional Education Council has identified literacy as a central priority for the coming year. In cooperation with the schools, we would like to assist in nurturing a new generation of writers and readers. We dream of a contest this year that will raise the profile of this project in the Sahtu and beyond.

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Deborah Simmons works for the Sahtu Land Use Planning Board in Fort Good Hope.

WANTED WRITING • PHOTOGRAPHY • ART

Send your submissions to Sahtú Godé Dáhk'é, PO Box 239, Fort Good Hope, NT X0E 0H0. Writing may be in Dene (Syllabics or Roman orthography), French or English languages. All submissions must include the name and contact information for the author. If you wish your work to be returned, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Please also send letters to the editor with your comments and feedback!