

“Dinjii Zhuh (Gwich’in) perspectives of epidemics: Contemporary Indigenous concepts of survival, community, strength, & COVID-19 in the Northwest Territories, Canada”

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The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, language and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies (Smith, 1999: 65)

Today, the pandemic of SARS-CoV-2 has touched every corner of the globe and the Canadian North is no different. Dinjii Zhuh (Gwich’in) living in the Gwich’in Settlement Area, alongside other northern Indigenous Nations, have undoubtedly been affected – culturally, socially, economically – by these measures. Dinjii Zhuh living in Inuvik have experienced unemployment, isolation, psychological distress, and other hardships. Dinjii Zhuh families have returned to the Land during the pandemic, where one can socially distance themselves from others yet still enjoy community. And our cultural practices and Gwich’in Knowledge have been passed on during the pandemic: storytelling, hunting, working with wood and snow, preparing moosehides for smoking, gathering traditional medicines, and much more. For those who remained indoors, Youth learned how to bead and sew, work with leather, engage in storytelling, and learn our language Dinjii Zhuh Ginjik. There is a need to better understand Dinjii Zhuh lived experiences and coping mechanisms through the COVID-19 pandemic. We have connected health, wellness, and spirituality to our

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ancestral Lands since Time Immemorial and today is no different. Accounts of cultural resurgence, resiliency, humour, and strength are at the forefront.

This project seeks to better understand ongoing Dinjii Zhuh oral histories: the kin networks in which stories are kept alive, how stories are told, in which contexts stories are shared, and how these ancient Dinjii Zhuh practices are ongoing in the North. Despite over a century of colonialization, forced institutionalization at Indian Residential Schools, and oppressive language policies, traditions around stories have persisted. And despite the pandemic and public health orders, we can still engage in the rich Dinjii Zhuh storytelling philosophies and practices, from a safe distance.

This project is a partnership first originating between the Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council (GTC) and Dr. Crystal Gail Fraser at the University of Alberta. As a result of our 1992 Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement, the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) was established in 1993 as the cultural and heritage arm of the GTC; in 2016, the GSCI became the Department of Cultural and Heritage (DCH). Over the past twenty-seven years, the DCH has had a strong presence in all Dinjii communities, with offices in Inuvik, Tsiigehtchic, Fort McPherson, and Yellowknife. They have undertaken dozens of studies that have ranged from the sewing of traditional clothing to wildlife management to astrological studies. The DCH have a history of partnering with academic institutions in the pursuit of undertaking important and relevant research for Dinjii Zhuh. Together, the GTC and Fraser are working together on how best to interview interested Dinjii Zhuh about their experiences, not only with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also with historical disease outbreaks, epidemics, and public health issues.

The body of scholarly literature about northern Indigenous societies is small, particularly when focusing on Dinjii Zhuh communities and epidemics. Considering the North more broadly, most academic analyses have been undertaken by non-Indigenous, southern scholars. In Canadian history, it has been commonplace to reflect on the expansionist agenda of the Canadian state, and settler forms of exploration, economies, politics, and administration in the North, all within an exploitative and colonial "frontier" lens that frames the North as an empty, "primitive" Land. Social histories of Indigenous Peoples in the North have been scant, although settler historian Kerry Abel did write about the 1928 and 1944 influenza epidemics, in the context of fur-trading economies, missionaries, and sweeping socio-economic and political changes. Rightly, Abel notes that

the psychological impact of these epidemics must have been tremendous, and the substantial reduction of the population was indeed socially, economically, and politically significant. A seriously demoralized population had no energy left for long-distance travel or warring (Abel, 1993: 111).

This was devastating for Indigenous health; not only did communities lose large numbers of people, but their inability to travel to their fish camps in the fall and into the mountains for hunting big game in the winter severely restricted their ability to feed their families and provide furs to the Hudson's Bay Company in exchange for food stuff and vital equipment. Indigenous northerners have been grateful for and engaged with our histories, even those told by non-Indigenous outsiders.

This project, however, provides a much-needed perspective based on the local knowledge of Dinjii Zhuh communities and their experiences. We have always known that our communities creatively

navigated challenging times, such as diseases, illnesses, and epidemics. For a better historical understanding, the DCH has a number of accounts of the influenza epidemics of 1928 and during the mid-1940s. Documents such as the unpublished Gwich'in COPE Stories, various Elders' Calendars, and *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak* tell the stories of these health hardships, often in the words of our own Elders (Heine et. al., 2007). Although these stories are culturally invaluable, they only shed light on how our ancestors and Elders processed epidemics, death, and social trauma after time had passed. For a contemporary understanding, we are undertaking interviews among Dinjii Zhuh of all ages, in the pursuit of publishing video stories, adding to the historical record, and sharing some of the more poignant stories (contemporary and historical) to write an academic article that examines the strength, fortitude, and resilience of Dinjii Zhuh in times of pandemic.

References

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