

“THE LAND WE LIVE ON IS OUR HOME”

THE ‘GAMETI KO’ PROJECT SECOND COMMUNITY-LED WORKSHOP

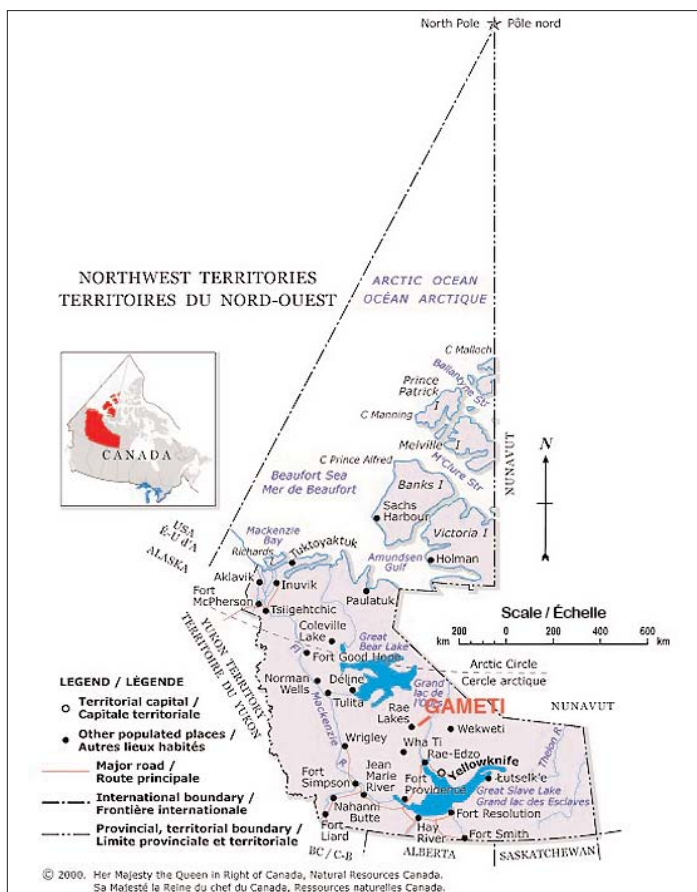


Image 1: Northwest Territories

BACKGROUND

Gameti is a Tlicho (Dogrib) Dene community in the Northwest Territories 240 km northwest of Yellowknife. Through a project called Gameti Ko the people of Gameti have been exploring issues related to the community's traditional and indivisible ties to the land and their link to the future—the younger generation. This project continues the elders' long-standing support for work that can help transmit their cultural heritage to the youth—projects that both help bridge the slowly emerging gap between generations and can facilitate community wellness.¹

The elders' longer-term ambition for Gameti Ko is to design and build a contemporary housing prototype that evolves out of their traditional knowledge. It is also hoped that such a house can help encourage more appropriate community planning. However, the real essence of the project, in the eyes of the elders, is to formally link a modern home, their homeland, and their traditional ways.

This project can only be fully understood in relation to its broader context. Firstly, it is a response to housing that does not reflect Tlicho culture, in their day-to-day usage nor its symbolism for them. The designs solely replicate southern Canadian models. The existing housing stock of Gameti does not provide a real sense of place within a First Nation homeland. In addition, the imported design provided without consultation, does not engender any sense of propriety.



Image 2: Gameti Bird's Eye View

¹ Gameti Ko's community coordinator, Tony Rabesca, is also Gameti First Nation Band Council's Community Wellness Coordinator.



Gameti (Rae Lakes)



Gameti (Rae Lakes)



Behchok'o (Rae-Edzo)

Image 3: House and Teepee

Secondly, the Tlicho people have just settled their land claim with the federal government, a claim that recognizes both their ownership of, and authority to govern, Tlicho De—the Dogrib land. For the first time since Treaty 11 was signed in 1921, this agreement given royal assent in February 2005, has legally established Dogrib control of *Tlicho De* at crucial time when large scale development is once again a major issue, from the Mackenzie Valley pipeline to diamond mines.

This statement by Romie Wetrade² conveys the Tlicho's sense of frustration over the appropriation of their ancestral land by others:

Our ancestors' footprints show on the ground. [It shows where they used to follow the caribou]. What about those people from down south? There are no footprints of theirs or their trails around this area, but still they are talking about the land. They're saying they are going to look around for diamonds; they're going to look for gas. There are no footprints of them on this land but they still explore beside us. . . . All the Dogrib people have been all over the land and even though the lands are marked, they have travelled way beyond the map where there are marks showing but it still seems like they are prowling through our houses. . . . Around our cabin area they would find diamonds, they would find gas and they would find everything while there's no one at the cabin and it seems like that's what they are doing to our ancestor's homes and they break in and look around everywhere on our land. They think nobody has been there and they are saying that's where we're looking and digging for diamonds. . . . They never been there but they still looking for diamonds . . . where our ancestors used to travel. They're prowling through our property.

In recent history the Dene have been governed by southern-based institutions. The only homes that they have been provided are southern-based housing forms into which they had no creative design input. The second Gameti Ko community-led charrette was, therefore, part of a process to correct the dismissive way that decisions were taken and imposed in the past. The process is an acknowledgement that if legitimate sustainable development is to be successful, it must originate locally.

The elders who conceived, and now direct, Gameti Ko have always stated that to be more than well intentioned like so much past policy and planning, the project must have a local sense of ownership. For ownership to be established Gameti Ko had to draw on traditional knowledge from the community. Our overall ambition was that appropriate architectural design would facilitate cultural continuity.

Tlicho elders recognized that they would require cultural intermediaries to help qualify parallel understandings and to facilitate an equitable dialogue between the Dogrib tradition and western modernity. This is the founding ethos and guiding principle of the Gameti Ko project.

If we are to remain a strong people we must educate our children and grandchildren in both the white and the Tlicho ways. They must be strong like two people.³

Chief Jimmy Bruneau

² Legat. A et al. 1995. 'TāīchòNdè - The importance of Knowing'. The Dene Cultural Institute, Hay River.

³ Legat. Alice et al. 2000. 'ibid'. P. 21.



Image 4: Elders and youth

This is a slow process and is not dependent on the time-orientations of southern culture. Time must also be spent on the land, something implicit to any understanding of Tlicho culture. After all, the words for *footsteps* and *knowledge* are the same in Tlicho language.

For a long time . . . our ancestors went through hard times and to this day we are still following ginaowo (their footsteps) and to this day the people use ginaowo (their knowledge) in order to survive.

Andrew Gon, 1994⁴

THE TRADITIONAL HEARTH

Being in the bush promotes a return to a lifestyle not regulated by "industrial" time. Camp life is relatively incomprehensible to a person immersed in the constraints and individualistic nature of "Western" life. Life here is interwoven into the fabric of the whole day. "Work" is neither compressed into particular hours, nor spatially isolated. The hearth is the heart of extended family groupings, both for their domestic built structures and activities. It is a multi-centred community spatially organized, generally according to kinship groupings with a dedicated hearth. In any grouping there may be additional individual tents occupied separately by single men and single women. Friends who share hunting or joking relationships may also live in close proximity to the core family hearth.

⁴ Legat. Alice et al. 2000. 'ibid'. P. 23.



Image 5: Summer Camp

People come and go between hearths all the time, at times gathering around one hearth. Although there are overlapping areas, as much temporally as spatially defined, the camp can be generally understood as a communal space within which indoors and outdoors are linked rather than separated. There is a dynamic ebb and flow—fluid and flexible. This illustrates the dichotomy between the western idea of a house as a spatial unit in the built environment and the Dogrib idea of a home. The "house" is a physical unit that delineates space for the members of a household and provides shelter and protection for domestic activities. For

the Dogrib, land use and occupancy are inextricably linked and home is not to be contained but understood as an expansive experience. Dogrib culture links the geophysical and cultural landscapes through oral tradition. This is the relationship joining camp and land. "In" and "out" are superfluous, since both are home. You are always "on" the land.

The Gameti Ko project can ultimately succeed if it develops a contemporary design language that links home and homeland. This cannot be achieved in any single workshop, but rather through an incremental process of events, workshops, and parallel projects that Gameti Ko aims to link the modern settlement with its traditional lifestyle and homeland.

THE GAMETI KO PROJECT

The elders of Gameti have directed the project from its conception. The Gameti First Nation Band Council has also pledged its support. They feel that it is possible to design modern housing that is specific to their culture, while showing how traditional knowledge is relevant to life in the 21st century and a self-governed Tlicho community. This is especially important for the Gameti youth who are the future. The project hopes to define a domestic environment relevant to hunter-gatherer traditions, yet also to show how modern house designs can evolve according to the traditional Dogrib idea of home.



Image 6: Showing a construction detail

This project also intends to protect the built heritage of Gameti, in particular the remaining original cabins which will be designated as heritage sites. They also wish to train youth in research methods appropriate to the collecting and documentation of traditional knowledge, in both design and traditional construction skills, and to develop an overall sustainable capacity in all these areas.

It should always be considered that the elders have promoted this project because of their belief in *being strong like two people*. For the youth, working with the elders will be part of this process. The Dogrib Community Services Board, responsible for education delivery within the Tlicho homeland, and the Yellowknife campus of the pan-Arctic continuing education institution, Aurora College, are supporting this component of the project.

The general goals for this project are diverse. They include

- preserving heritage
- defining cultural continuity
- promoting more appropriate community planning
- facilitating community wellness
- bridging the gap between elders and youth
- developing skills, especially for the youth
- facilitating empowerment of First Nation housing design and provision
- creating a sense of cultural and community propriety over housing design, manufacture and provision
- designing and building a localized and modern housing prototype, based on traditional knowledge and aesthetic, and environmental sensitivity
- developing transferable job skills capacity of Gameti youth through mentoring and training
- identifying other financial streams to break reliance on government monies

THE SECOND WORKSHOP

In northern communities many workshops and meetings take place according to the timeframe and priorities of external agencies, be they government or commercial. Flying in with a PowerPoint presentation and fast food is often what is perceived as community consultation. Consultants leave with little insight and many leave with at least as much prejudice. Few allocate time to walk around, to visit and talk with people, to allow for the reflective silences, never mind consider the time it takes for a community to digest often complex information and discuss the issues at their own pace and in their own language. In many meetings, the manners and hospitality of a traditional community are often misunderstood as affirmation of whatever outcome was desired.



Image 7: Starting the workshop

A first workshop, held in January 2004, brought together all interested parties from Gameti to outline the project's parameters and program the conception and development, all from within the community. It was essential to the Gameti Ko elders committee to invite, elders and youth from the other three Dogrib communities of Rae-Edzo, Wewekti and Wha Ti, to that first workshop. This sense of inclusiveness was culturally important. It was seen as essential to create a consensus that Gameti should "host" the project, otherwise Gameti Ko could undermine the fundamental desire of the elders to maintain unity across their homeland. This first workshop ended with a spontaneous call for a motion to be presented so all participants could demonstrate their commitment to Gameti Ko. This gesture also showed Gameti that they had universal support to develop the project on behalf of all Dogrib communities.



Image 8: Defining our vision

The second Gameti Ko workshop, illustrates how things can happen differently when local people have organizational input on their own terms. It also demonstrates how research methods can, and must, accommodate the local—especially if they are attempting to contribute to genuine sustainable development. In this workshop the actual event had little correlation to the planned event. Prior meetings, rather than the formal workshop, became the place where many of the issues were informally discussed. Thus much of the anticipated information was actually generated before the invited observers arrived in the community. The situation had seemed right and the elders had participated in two days of lengthy discussion on the characteristics of a Dogrib home.

Having an already developed discussion, which the participants had then taken "home" and developed further, the consequent "official" workshop became a vehicle for the project organizers to confirm the ideas and to develop more detail. The first meetings had also allowed the community to informally discuss their priorities in their own language, rather than through translation. This enabled them to speak in their own way, with conversation flowing like a story, not hindered by the speed of the translator. (This also illustrates that for a workshop to be successful non-Dogrib speakers should assume the kind of patience and humility that the elders show when English is being spoken.)

One of the most vital preparations for a workshop is getting the question right. The elders are holistic and generalist thinkers, they answer in different ways, implicitly describing the connectedness of things—they know that problems are not "discipline" specific. In this workshop the visual metaphor of the trail was used. The elders then offered their vision of the *trail for future generations*—which is inclusive of land, home and culture, a house that can be "strong like two people."

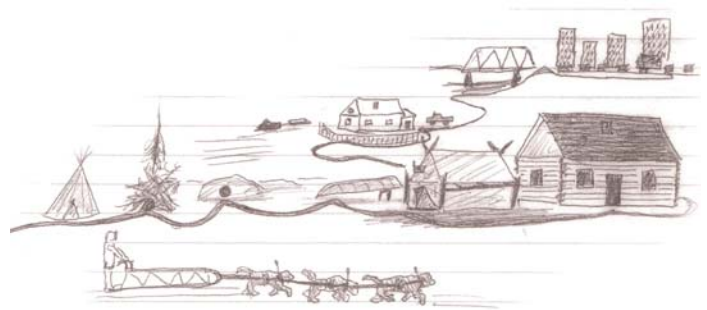


Image 9: Tony's sketch of the trail

THE TRAIL FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Gameti was initially established as a permanent community in the late sixties by a number of elders who wanted their families to return to a more traditional lifestyle. They wanted their contemporary generation to look outward to the land, rather than along the highway to Yellowknife, "the moneyplace." In this way they were returning to the notion of the hearth, rather than a remote area. As Philip Zoe, a Gameti elder, has said: *"To us this country is not remote; all around us is where people have lived. It is our home."*

Today's generation of elders learned from their elders. However they are concerned that the continuation of this orally transmitted knowledge cannot now be presumed. The younger generation could lose what it means to be Tlicho. Romie Wetrade is referring to this when he comments: *"We can't afford to have English dominating our thought."*

In this context the project is also a strategy to generate community wellness. This was reinforced at the end of the first Gameti Ko workshop by Michele Rabesca, an elder from Rae-Edzo, who said:

"We want our children to live well but they are living a life that is foreign. We always had to think ahead, where to get fish, store fish, build a cache. I'm not saying we should make young people like us, only that we should do what we can to show them how to do things and how we lived on the land. Not just words. If we show them they will retain something."

A previous workshop had proposed that old cabins be documented and preserved "as a working symbol" of the trail, not merely heritage buildings stripped of meaning. Both Romie Wetrade and Louis Whane, a Wekweti (Snare Lake) elder, want the original cabins of Gameti to illustrate a way of life at the cusp of change. To them the cabins can be tools to demonstrate traditional knowledge, while providing a tangible link with Dogrib ancestry and Gameti's origins for the changing community. Louis Whane illustrates this by saying:

"As I behold the empty cabins I feel I am shaking the hands of the past ... if I come back [to Gameti] and see the cabins preserved I am going to think our relatives are still alive. The cabin, that way of life, that was traditional knowledge."



Image 10: Peeling logs

The Gameti First Nation Band Council and the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Justice have now committed the funding of this initial phase. Elders and youth will soon start to work together peeling logs harvested last year. The project will also include students from the Jean Wetrade Gameti School, all of whom will be academically credited for the work. Indeed, the elders have stipulated that they want the "first phase" cabin constructed near the school and that it be used as a learning center, as well as for spiritual events.



Image 11: Choosing the site

CONCLUSION

The Gameti Ko workshops continue to develop the dialogue initiated by the community—particularly the elders.⁵ The second workshop is only part of a process, not an isolated event.

Overall, the workshop has been a tool for developing a community-led framework that informs and directs the project towards the realization of the community's own vision of sustainable development and cultural continuity.



Image 12: The land we live on is our home.

The most practical consequence of the second workshop was a broad definition of the characteristics of a Tlicho house. In the words of the elders this is:

- a place that is safe for elders and young people
- a place where people share: food
stories
knowledge
skills
- a place where people can observe other people working so they can learn

- a place where you learn and share stories, languages and skills because it is open enough
- a place to see and hear
- a place where both the traditional Dogrib and modern ways can be followed and learned. *“Even if young people are doing homework and studying for school—they should be able to hear the Dogrib language, stories and learn Dogrib knowledge and skill. Thus, even if youth are not actually listening to stories they can still hear them.”*
- a place that brings peace and harmony
- a place that is comfortable enough to both talk about and solve the problems that family and community face
- a place that is easy for people to work together, both within and around the home
- a place that is flexible, because family is important and children come and stay for periods at a time, as do grandparents and grandchildren
- a home is a place that should have:
 - outside storage
 - a smoke house
 - a place to prepare skins
- a house should include log construction and be made from local resources from the land
- a house should have at least two doors, one for the meat to come through and another for menstruating women to use. This latter door should be the backdoor, be near the bathroom and away from the meat.
- a house should be part of the environment, it should be easy for inhabitants to move between the interior and outside

The land we live on is our home.

Madeleine Drybones, 1999⁶

⁵ It should be noted that all Gameti Ko workshops have, to date, been funded by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) Department of Municipal and Community Affairs. This funding was given without condition.

⁶ Taped interview - Home 98/08/04 1/1A

Appendix

The participants of the second Gameti Ko workshop were:

Band council; Chief Archie Wetrade, Eddie Chocolate.

Elders; Joe Black, Romie Wetrade, Liza Mantla, Rosalie Tailbone, Philip Zoe, Joe Mantla, Louie Zoe, Pierre Mantla, Paul Wetrade, Mary Apples, Madelaine Arrowmaker, Elizabeth Chocolate, Bella Zoe, Angelique Mantla, Jimmy Wogary, Charlie, Chocolate, Helen Wetrade, Mary Rose Arrowmaker, Antoine Wetrade, George Neadzo.

Translators; Madelaine Chocolate, David Chocolate.

Video; Antoine Wetrade.

Cooks; Helen Wetrade, Mary Rose Blackduck.

Gameti Ko coordinators; Tony Rabesca, Gavin Renwick.

In addition, head teacher James Robinson and students from the Jean Wetrade Elementary Gameti School made intermittent visits to the workshop.

Observers; Bill Semple (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation), Patrick Scott (MACA, Government of the Northwest Territories).

The pre-workshop meetings were coordinated by Madelaine Chocolate, Allice Legat and Tony Rabesca.

CMHC Project Manager: Sandra Marshall

Consultant: Gavin Renwick

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