

Ets'ulah

Ets'ulah:
"The language is like ets'ulah"

by

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Abstract

My project is about how ets'ulah (Dene love song) can contribute to the revitalization of Sahtúgot'ıne language. The Sahtúgot'ıne language is spoken in the community of Déııne, Northwest Territories. My research highlights the Sahtúgot'ıne tradition of ets'ulah, a musical form that will entice young people to use their language. Ets'ulah is the most neglected of the musical expressions of culture, yet one of the oldest traditions for representing kinship links, family legacies, and ties to the land and life on the land. I provide a study of noted singer the late Eliza Blondin to help revitalize Sahtúgot'ıne language through the value of ets'ulah, for as Besha Blondin, Eliza's daughter, says, "the language is like ets'ulah".

Ets'ulah

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my grandchildren, Marcus and Mya. Mahsi-cho for being patient and loving, love you forever.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my family for the continuous support of my study and related research, for their patience, motivation, and immense knowledge. Their guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this project. I would also like to say a great mahsi-cho to my cousin Fbbie Tatti, with her immense knowledge of our language. I would also like to express the same sentiments to the people of Délı̄ne and the Sahtú region.

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Ets'ulah

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Dedication.....	3
Acknowledgement	3
T'akwə kədə héonǰwı - Introduction.....	6
Gowéré Gots'ę Godı - Context	7
Nakǰnę - Us	8
<i>Sóot'ǰnę Tsíkəwı - Suffering of My People</i>	9
<i>Gonezǰ Agót'ę Gogha - For a Better Future</i>	11
Segodı – My Story	14
Dene Náoweré – Our Culture	15
Mǰla ǰeǰá – Whiteman's Law	17
<i>K'áowe kə – Governments</i>	19
Sahtúgot'ǰnę Nádaketse – Strength of Déǰnę	20
Ayıı Gha? – What For?.....	22
ǰerǰht'ę Behts'énadı – Literature Review.....	23
Dánǰ Bek'ə Eghálaidá – Methodology	28
Godı Behédágǰht'e – Results	31
Godı Ts'éhtsǰ - Recommendations	31
Bək'ənadets'erewe - Reflection	34
ǰerǰht'ę Hets'énádaredı - References.....	37
Godı - Glossary	40

T'akwə kədə héonjwi - Introduction

In my Master's Project I wish to explore how ets'ulah (Dene love song) contributes to Sahtúgot'ıne language revitalization. I will produce a prototype booklet resource based on the late Eliza Blondin's ets'ulah (Dene love song) and her descendant's interpretation of the lyrics. My research is on ets'ulah in the Sahtúgot'ıne tradition, a musical form that I believe will entice young people to use their language currently. Ets'ulah is the most neglected of the musical expressions of culture, yet one of the oldest traditions for representing kinship links, family legacies, and ties to the land and life on the land. My wish is to revive the valuing of ets'ulah through a study of the ets'ulah of noted singer, the late Eliza Blondin, for as Besha Blondin, Eliza's daughter, says, "the language is like ets'ulah". I wish to explore the connection between this expanded understanding of the meaning and purpose of the Dene love song and the revitalization of the Sahtúgot'ıne language in Délıne.

To quote Ethel Blondin-Andrew:

"Dene love song can be used to give expression and evocation of certain emotional or spiritual event. It can be a joyous welcoming, a mournful farewell departure, a worshipping of the land and a giving thanks for what it gives us, all these occasions have their own vocabulary, it all has to be just the right words or the message is lost and awkward. Semantically speaking it is all very specific, clever and 100% appropriate, it is like that Dene have a word for everything. A good exercise would be to take each ULA ZHINE and put all the words that would relate to each one of them." (personal communication, 2013)

Gowéré Gots'ę Godı - Context

Déłıne,¹ a small community in the Northwest Territories, about 500 miles northwest of the Northwest Territories' capital city of Yellowknife, is the setting for my research on this proposed topic. The community is located on Great Bear Lake and there are about 600 people living there. The community has a very traditional cultural base as most Déłıne people continue to speak their Sahtúgot'ıne language. A number of children and young people may speak the language but choose to speak English during their social interactions with their friends.

The Sahtúgot'ıne language is spoken in Déłıne as a first language by 290 people (Government of the NWT Statistics 2012) and it is a language that is at risk of extinction. It is part of the North Slavey language which is spoken in the Sahtu Region of the Northwest Territories. It is also one of the 11 official languages, 9 of which are Aboriginal languages.

¹ The name of Déłıne can be spelled in more than one way. I will consistently use this spelling in this paper.



Figure 1: Official Languages of the Northwest Territories.

https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/publications/024-Official_Languages_Map-web.pdf

Nakıne - Us

In the beginning we as Dene people of the Sahtu were in harmony with all aspects of our environment. It seemed as if this period of harmony was a brief moment but we remember it was very beautiful. We have a very great connection with who we are as Dene people. Way before contact the Dene people had control over their lives. They lived off the land and traveled on it to survive. They had all the values and practices to survive. They felt worthy and had a deep self-respect for what they did.

There was one thing that they all had that kept everything together. It was their language and culture. Dene people believed that language and culture is all in one.

When you have a background with a very strong language you can survive.

Our language holds an incredible amount of evidence and knowledge of who we are as people. We, as Dene people, must remember to share our way of knowing if we are to be among other people that live around us. We can help each other because we can see all the suffering our people have gone through. As we all know with today's new way of seeing sufferings, for example new technology that our children play with every day, you can see people's pain on television, computers and any hand held device. We all must find a way to help each other.

Sóot'ıne Tsıkəwı - Suffering of My People

The policy was to force families to move to Délıne because their children had to go to school. The school opened in 1960s and the parents were told they had to send their children to school. Most of the people had lived on the land. The move to community had a tremendous impact on the families. Having white teachers teach them only in English was extremely different and difficult. Some of the tremendous changes that occurred affected children who were sent away to residential school. Most of them still live in Délıne today and have suffered because of their Residential School experiences. In spite of all this, many people survived while maintaining their language and culture, because it was strong in our community when I was growing up. It is our generation's children and grandchildren who are sometimes not very successful in either world. Because of that, families suffer from addictions, are less educated and tradition is not passed on to the next generations.

Ets'ulah

Our people had little or no immunity to diseases that were brought to my community from other places. Smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis (TB) were some of the diseases that killed many people. It was very difficult to stop some of these diseases from spreading. Many people who spoke no English and had never travelled south were sent to institutions down south. They pined for their families, their language and their country food. Many did not come back and many of the burials away from Délı̄ne were never recorded. Some people, who have passed on, said they were still waiting for their loved ones to come home. I am heartened, however, that some of the old teachings and medicinal practices are not completely lost and are recorded or being recorded as valuable information to us and to the rest of the world.

Up until the late 1970s, Délı̄ne people and people who lived out on the land, were very independent and sustained their own life. Furs and skins were traded and brought enough money for people to live very well. Food from the land was abundant. Then the fur industry died due to the campaign about cruelty to animals. Some of my people slowly stopped hunting and they and their families became dependent upon the welfare system to live. I saw my people slowly lose their independence and depend more on outside help for their sustenance.

As outsiders started to come to the land of the Dene, for various reasons, some died, or left as soon as they could. Death usually occurred to those who refused to be helped because they considered the land savage and its people "savages". Traders and missionaries often became part of the camps, learned our language and lived with the people. It wasn't until schools opened and non-aboriginal teachers arrived that life fully changed. Of all the people who should have been the most receptive and respected, the

Ets'ulah

teachers were the ones that believed our language and culture should die and children should become "civilized".

Gonezq Agót'é Gogha - For a Better Future

In the community of Déljne, there are language experts who can develop their own material to teach Sahtúgot'jine language. Resources for language can include workbooks, readers, alphabet charts, dictionaries and audio and video information. These resources can be available to be used by students throughout the school and community. Some students really enjoy learning to write and read in their first language. Others will learn the language but speak English because they think it is cool. The students see and hear the English language every day on television, videotapes, DVD's, and need to use it so that they can play video games.

We must teach our children both their first language and English so that they can learn how to adapt in the English language. If the members of the community can come together and help each other we may be able to see some changes in our children. The members and the teachers can tell the young children who are in school now that maybe one day they will be the ones that will be standing in front of the class and teaching. We must explain to the whole community about the importance of telling their children to graduate. They can still learn in their own language even when they are not in the community. They must not be afraid to go beyond what they know. As they go on to higher education, they can learn to read and write in their first language and receive credit for it. Students who are now learning at a very young age can have a career in their first language. We must tell them how important language learning is for their future as First Nation peoples.

Ets'ulah

In the cultural inclusion program, students are learning to play the drum and sing the Slavey songs as well as learning to sew and how to survive on the land. We have to ensure that we respond to the dire need for First Nation teachers. Délı̄ne needs to make an agreement with the government in the self-government agreement being negotiated that there will be a majority of First Nation teachers in their school. Délı̄ne also needs a strong, legal binding statement saying that funding will be provided for this purpose for the community. They will need to also design incentives for the teachers such as housing subsidies to combat the high cost of living in the north.

While people recognize the importance of using their first language to teach school subjects, they need to know that they must ensure that educational criteria for learning also need to be followed. For example, in the education system there are core subjects that need to be taught. This is why we need qualified First Nation teachers.

The benefit of learning in the first language is that the student can grasp a second language a lot easier. The student who is being taught in both languages will also learn the ways to survive in both societies. Some parents would like their children to learn how to survive out on the land. Parents who are knowledgeable in the ways of the land can teach the students, who can also continue to pursue their education in the school system. They can continue to learn in their own language if it is integrated within other subjects. This method can build the base for a First Nation person's survival as a cultural and traditional Dene. The students also gain inner strength and understanding about how to survive in the world as it is today.

When you have your own people teaching, a First Nation student will gain the idea that they also have the option to be a teacher as their parents were to them.

This pattern of teaching is a model to help determine who can be a very good teacher and to encourage them to pursue the study of teaching for that purpose.

First Nation leaders of Délı̄ne also need to inform the government, industries, and people in authority that, if they are in our communities, they must invite students to their gatherings. That way, the students can see what future employment and learning opportunities are available for them. In other words, our teachers are right in front of us and we just have to recognize them. There are a lot of opportunities for our people to take control of our own lives and take back what is important to us as people if we really want to survive. We also need to remind ourselves what our own people use to govern their own lives, how they learn, and why it was important. We must teach our own history and let our children remember those stories about what it was like, whether it is good or bad. Both can lead to learning. It may encourage our children to try harder to be where they want to be.

Currently, Délı̄ne has negotiated their self-government agreement. It would be important to include in the agreement a strong position about how our children and people should be taught. There are a lot of problems, but if we take actions in the field of education, as noted above, we might be able to help our people learn and survive.

The thought that maybe one day we as First Nation peoples will survive and be content with our choices inspires me. The idea of having our own people to lead us will

Ets'ulah

be fantastic but we have to work together and we must be united in all the decisions that we make.

To understand the importance of self-government, you must really know your Dene identity, as who you are is very important.

People must know why it is important to have self-government in our community. The leaders of Délı̄ne must make every effort to make self-government agreements work for their people. It is for the future of our children and our own survival.

Segodí – My Story

I was born in Tulít'a, Northwest Territories and I was raised in Délı̄ne. We only spoke Sahtúgot'ı̄ne and we were raised by the whole community. Some people taught me about respect, some told me traditional stories and beliefs, some taught me to use skills of survival and other traditional tools. As a young person I was trained in the ways of my people and being Dene. They taught me how to look at the land, the water, the sky, to feel the wind and to listen to my surroundings. My people believe children's training starts at birth. Much of this was interrupted when our people were told by the government that they had to move from the land to the community. I remember when we came to Délı̄ne and I was left behind in Délı̄ne when my family went back to the land.

As a child you remember events that affect your life.

There are historical events that may have negative or positive impacts on a child's life. It's not until we are older that we can reflect on and identify events that have shaped or

Ets'ulah

changed our lives as children. At least for me, now that I think about my life, these are some of the events that changed my people and community forever.

When I think back, I was about eight years of age when I first started school coming from the land. As a young child, and because I had not lived in the community it was very scary because I was away from my immediate family. When I first entered the school I did not speak a word of English. I had to learn fast. If I didn't I would be strapped with a leather belt. As my schooling progressed so did my grasp of the English language. I hope in some way I can contribute some changes to the school system to better reflect the language and culture of the Dene people.

As an adult, I have learned to survive as I was taught by my family and people. I was given the role of keeping my language alive and that allowed me to have many benefits in terms of outspokenness and leadership roles in reviving our Sahtúgot'ıne language.

Today, the life and roles of children have changed, but culture and tradition are very strong. Our language is dying and our children and grandchildren are not speaking their language. We have everything that is available for us to contribute to revive our languages. It only takes one person to initiate change.

Dene Náoweré – Our Culture

Due to Dene leaders and the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), people around the world are very curious about people of the North. They long to know about our traditions, beliefs, knowledge on the land that is very different and difficult,

Ets'ulah

clothing styles, protocols with outsiders, and generally, to learn about a group of people who take pride in their language and culture.

The media has been instrumental in bringing Dene life to the forefront. When websites of the people were created, people from all over the world were excited to learn about the Dene and had many questions.

Traditions are very important to us, for example, the naming of a child when he or she is given the name or names of loved ones that have passed on. The name or names are special to the individual and are usually not recorded in school or through the government. The child is raised as if they are that person. Kinship terms are used for that name to the child by all family members. In fact, each child, through their names, has his own particular relatives and kin because of the name. Children take on their relatives' names and are raised with much affection and love through that name. So, we have blood relatives and we have name relatives. For example my last name is Tutcho which is my father's side of the family and the literal translation is "Waterbig". I am responsible for my name and where it comes from. There are others who also have songs as children. They had special songs sung to them.

For every value, the Dene has a belief taught to children so they will learn to live a good life. For example, when I was a child my uncle told me not to drag my feet or I would become a lazy person. At that time I never thought anything about it until when I became an adult I understood what he meant. We were told not to step over men's personal items or the hunting, trapping and fishing gear for that would bring them misfortune. We were told never to kill an animal unless we intend to eat it. So that way we would not be wasteful.

Ets'ulah

All of these beliefs teach children to be respectful, obedient, good thinkers, and problem solvers. Above all, these are taught to children so they will be safe and able to survive. There are many such sayings and many teaching stories.

We were taught how to hunt animals in a respectful and sacred way. This was very crucial as we depended on the animals for life. There were practices that were followed to show respect for the animals. For instance, when a young man makes his first kill his clothing is ripped so that, for a future hunt, he will begin with more luck.

This was a very traditional way for us. For every action, there was a consequence. Everyone knew the rules and tried to live them. This was to ensure harmony and respect. Our values and beliefs were the foundation for our survival. Our traditions, practices and protocols, were the foundation for our people. It was our families and community who made sure we followed our laws. It was every-day practices and it was a part of our life, a part of our stories and a part of our environment.

When we talk about our culture in our own language, we can see the expression of understanding and pride on people's faces. It is also good that at any time when our people gather they always begin with an opening prayer. I know that Déljne has gone a long way to preserve the language, culture, and spirituality. However, there is still a lot of hard work to ensure the survival of these essential requirements for the education of the First Nation peoples.

Móla ʔeʔá – Whiteman's Law

Many Canadian laws have taken away our tradition, culture and languages. Canadian laws can never do justice to our way of knowing.

Ets'ulah

In the Canadian Constitution, under section 35, the Indian Act gave authority to the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer in the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities (Hanson, 2009). It destroyed our way of life, and now we have to find a way to rebuild it.

It had never occurred to us that we were going to need to revive our own language. All of us Aboriginal languages advocates know that our languages are dying and so are we as a people, because languages plus culture equals survival as a Nation. Our history as a people is also dying along with the culture and language. To be a little extreme we can say we are dying. We all know about our history thanks to those of us who have lived through it. It is what we do now that will make an impact on the people.

You had to have really wanted it very badly, if you as a Dene person from the Sahtu wanted to live a Dene life.

It is not only us as Aboriginal people who want to live through our languages.

A lot has been written about Aboriginal language revitalization. According to Dr. Joshua Fishman you must start small and worry about the big picture later (Fishman 1991). Aboriginal language learners should benefit from the teachings of our Ancestors. Elders have a role in the revitalization of our languages as they are the Keepers of our traditions, culture and languages. Elders have special gifts and the community looks to them for advice and guidance. They are respectful and willing to share their knowledge about Dene ways of knowing and traditional ways of life and experiences.

When your language is gone so is your culture.

Ets'ulah

If young people utilize their languages they can begin to experience their culture and maybe they can find a positive way of living their life through their languages. When we speak our languages it gives us pride and strength.

There is a saying from Tłıchǫ leaders Chief Jimmy Bruneau and Elizabeth Mackenzie, that when you speak two languages you are “strong like two people”.

K'áowe kə – Governments

Aboriginal Government roles in Aboriginal Languages through the Sahtu Land Claims and Délıne self-government agreements have reclaimed the rights to exercise the responsibilities to educate their people in their own languages.

In 1993, there was a Comprehensive Land Claims Agreement in the Sahtu Region with the Sahtu Dene and Métis. The Dene and Métis people wanted the claims completed immediately so that they would not lose out on the industry and development activities that were to happen in their own backyard. For instance, the oil and gas activities could destroy their traditional lands and all the related lifestyle activities.

In 1995, the Government of Canada introduced the Inherent Right to Self-Government Policy and, in 1996 the Délıne Land Corporation sent a formal proposal to start their self-government negotiations. In 1997, they started to negotiate a Process and Schedule Agreement for self-government negotiations to begin. The Agreement was signed in October 1998.

Ets'ulah

It took Déljne, the Federal Government, and the Territorial Government five years to negotiate the Agreement-In-Principle that was signed in August 2003 and that began the negotiations for the Déljne Self-government Agreement.

In the Agreement in Principle (AIP), there are sections regarding education for people from early childhood to adult education. There is also a section on language, culture, and spirituality. The greatest value we have comes from our language and our culture, as they keep us together as a people.

As this is for their children's survival parents have to be involved in the discussions about Aboriginal languages in the NWT. They also need the support of Government of the Northwest Territories as together they can build capacity to have impact on Aboriginal languages for the future of the next generation.

Sahtúgot'jñę Nádaketse – Strength of Déljñę

Aboriginal language revitalization work is important. Globally, there is a real threat to Aboriginal languages everywhere. In Canada, the lasting effects of residential schools have threatened Aboriginal languages. The recent Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) findings consider that "the establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide"" (TRC, 2015). We know that the Non-Aboriginals who were the principal controlling agents in the Northwest Territories forced their way of life and assimilated the Dene. The Dene Elders, however, because of their inner strength, were able to keep their Dene beliefs, values and traditional knowledge alive and showed them to the younger Dene generations. However, the dependencies of the younger generations are

Ets'ulah

strong and, although the Elders try to pass on their Dene knowledge, people of the younger generations do not all have the necessary traditional knowledge or skills to maintain the Dene way of life.

It is a very real threat to all Aboriginal languages in the NWT where English is dominant in all domains. In Délj̄ne, the proportion of North Slavey speakers is rapidly diminishing. The concern of Elders who see their future generation losing their culture and language is very evident. We need to find ways to appeal to young people and keep them interested in their languages. The use of our Sahtúgot'j̄ne language has decreased considerably over the past 50 years. The potential for loss of a number of our Northern languages is very high and will occur unless we work together to strengthen our Sahtúgot'j̄ne language use. When our people say "time immemorial" in respect to ensuring the life of our languages, our culture and our way of life, it means forever. In the Treaty documents our people said: "So long as the sun shines, rivers flow, and the grass grows, these words must never be broken". We as Dene people will be here for that unbroken time. The people of Délj̄ne have been very strong people and can be again. We have to assist each other to keep our Dene community, people and nation alive through our languages. We all know that our languages are dying and if we do not advocate for these languages we will not survive as a people. Our children are not speaking their language and if we want them to live we must find a way to help them. As for me I want my grandchildren one day to tell me their stories in the Sahtúgot'j̄ne language.

Ets'ulah

Ayí Gha? – What For?

My personal obligation and desire is to work with other Aboriginal scholars on this issue and share research results and practical concerns about how we can continue to encourage our people to be a Nation and speak our own language.

The reason for choosing to work with recordings of Délı̨ne Elders was to utilize ets'ulah (Dene love songs) with Aboriginal language revitalization in mind. This kind of work has not been done and I believe in the importance of knowing one's history and culture, which can be connected through ets'ulah. So by valuing one of the oldest traditions and understanding ets'ulah, kinship links and family legacies will be respected. Finding a tradition that might entice young people to use their language as much as possible is needed and I think ets'ulah could be that tradition. The late Eliza Blondin's songs are very important because they tell the story of our people, family and community history.

When I asked musician, storyteller, and fellow Dene, Paul Andrew, about how ets'ulah is related to Sahtúgot'ı̨ne language, he stated, "It's interrelated, you can't separate the two. It's like music in English or in French or Chinese. It's part of culture; social life and culture are so close together. To me you can't have music in Dene languages without language. It's really important. You say something in the Dene language, you might not really mean it but you wouldn't know if you didn't understand the language."

Eliza's daughter Besha said, "I think it's really important to really begin to start using it because ets'ulah is for the mind and heart to connect together. When we're

Dr. Leanne Hinton, a professor from the University of California, Berkeley, has created a program that has been used in the United States, Australia and Canada. In *Bringing Our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* (2013), the authors of each chapter bring it back to the family. This is what we all talked about in our classes; that we learn our languages in the home. Dr. Hinton has helped families bring back their endangered languages (pg.232). This book gives us a chance to dream that Dene too can bring our own languages home, that we can fight against using only the English language, and hear our future generations speaking and telling our stories and songs. We know that our people in various areas of North America are on the verge of losing their languages and that the English language is used mostly by our younger generations. As Aboriginal people we know that we have suffered a great deal through Residential School and that we were not allowed to speak our own language or use our culture. Aboriginal groups are trying to revitalize their languages. In this book and an earlier one that Dr. Hinton collaborated on, *How to Keep Your Language Alive*, the Master-Apprentice Program is described as one where speakers and learners pair up so that learners can relearn their languages and become speakers (Hinton et al, 2002).

In *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, author Bagele Chilisa (2012) talks about how the Indigenous worldview works. As I read the book I found some similarities in our Dene worldview where songs can be used for different reasons. Chapter 5 discusses the role of languages, oral literature and storytelling. In this context our people sing our songs telling stories of our people, our families and our community history. Our people continue teaching us and hoping that one day we will get it. The moment is here more

Ets'ulah

than ever. It is time to utilize whatever materials we can find or develop. If our people are not literate in their language they can tape stories, songs, and interviews. If they are literate, they can produce written versions of their tapes as well as additional texts, including letters, readings, and poems.

Not only individuals but families can play an important role in language transmission. They can provide opportunities for meaningful interactions both in and out of the home. When outside influences such as television and English-speaking visitors impose on the time intended for native language use, it may be necessary to schedule specific times, events, or places for the total and exclusive immersion in the home language. Families consisting of speakers as well as non-speakers must make a special effort to select such times so that the non-speakers or limited speakers can have the opportunity to gain some understanding and some basic communication skills in the home language. Family reunions provide additional opportunities for language learning and teaching.

When talking about working on languages and wanting to rebuild our languages and in my case the Sahtúgot'ı̄ne language, I know that it is sad to even be a witness to a language that is dying. We the speakers of the Sahtúgot'ı̄ne language have the opportunity to contribute to revitalize our Dene language. When I first heard Dr. Joshua Fishman on YouTube I found it absolutely amazing. In his book *Reversing Language Shift* he wrote about how people can start to make it work for them if they do not want to lose their languages. In his book he talked about people who claim that reversing language shift could not work because it is too late for some languages. But according to Dr. Fishman it is not "too late" it is just a matter of finding the best way to approach it.

Ets'ulah

He stated that if you are to worry too much about the big picture, it would be too much to handle. It would be better if you start small. Instead of the whole school district you start with a daycare center or an Aboriginal head start program (pg.12) or songs.

Dene Kede – Curriculum

Efforts have already been accomplished in the area of Aboriginal language curriculum development by the Government of the Northwest Territories. In 1993, the Government of the Northwest Territory developed the Dene Kede Curriculum. This Dene Kede Curriculum is one of the best actions of the government to help our people revitalize our Dene languages. The Legislative Assembly directed the development, production, and publication of *Dene Kede K-6*.

The Minister of Education and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment need to implement it across the Northwest Territories. *Dene Kede* is based on our language and culture.

When you talk to elders, they stress that you need to maintain your Dene language in a living form.

In today's new and modern technology, residents of the Northwest Territories need to encourage the Government by producing research showing why *Dene Kede* should be taught in all of the schools. As Dene people, we need to defend our Elders because they helped create *Dene Kede*. *Dene Kede* is a curriculum that was done by our people with assistance from the Government of the Northwest Territories. *Dene Kede* is a document that can help to keep our Dene language and culture alive due to the fact that it is based on the Dene perspective (pg. xiii-xiv).

The *Dene Kede* statement of the creation story

The creation story provides the basic philosophic principle for this curriculum. The creation story tells us that because we were created last of all beings, our continued survival requires us to be in respectful relationship with the land and all of its animals, the spiritual world, other people and ourselves. This is the Dene perspective. The purpose of this is to give this perspective back to our children. There is a need to root ourselves in tradition not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future. Our children, with the gift of their culture, can work towards ensuring our future survival as well as the survival of humankind. (pg. xv)

When we talk about the importance of Dene love songs, we have to envision an Elder sitting at the edge of a river bank and she will be searching her heart for the one she loved, who was chosen for someone else. She will sing to the man who she loves who has left with his family. The understanding of the words in the songs that is sung at times is very difficult but one can find that history and the origin of the song. Because these songs are created in the moment, children can also create their own songs with their language. In an article, "Musical Expression of the Dene", Tłı̨ch̨ education leader Lucy Lafferty and ethnomusicologist Elaine Keillor (2009) mention that these songs are repetitive and that children can learn their own language and speak the words of the song that they have created (pg. 28), and become aware of how our people are free to go about their lives and freely create beautiful songs.

In discussion, the Université de Montréal ethnomusicologist Dr. Nicole Beaudry mentioned how the melodies of Dene love songs can be written down. When I talked with her, she stated that among all Sahtú Dene song types, these are the songs that use the greatest number of words. Being creative with the songs, our young people could learn to write music and sing their songs for their people, family and community. They could also help develop summer programs for kids and youth which would make a

Ets'ulah

perfect tool for learning to play with the language and for developing vocabulary that is meaningful for the community.

It is said that you can learn language through music because it can be made as simple as the ABC song.

It is also said that our people use those songs for very important things from childbirth to death. In an article by Margaret Clunies Ross on “Australian Aboriginal Oral Traditions” (1986), the author talks about how songs are very sacred and that only certain clan member in Australian communities can sing them (pg. 238). I think of times when certain people sing ets'ulah and of some families who can sing them very well, I think for instance of the late Eliza Blondin.

About 25 year ago Dr. Nicole Beaudry did some research in the Sahtú, recording many Elders. Dr. Beaudry has done this research since the late 80s. In my own research I have requested using her research material from the late Eliza Blondin, her ets'ulah in Délı̨ne. She has agreed that we work together on other Elders' recordings of the Sahtú region.

Dánı̨ Bek'ə Egháı̨ı́á – Methodology

The first thing I did was ask Dr. Nicole Beaudry if I could use her recordings, because I was going to work with ets'ulah, because I knew that the recordings were available. I contacted her and, in fact, she was looking for me, as she was going to work with the community of Délı̨ne. She agreed that I could use her recordings of the late Elder Eliza Blondin, and she informed me that they were stored at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife. Dr. Beaudry mailed the recordings, and

Ets'ulah

emailed corresponding transcripts of the Elder singing ets'ulah. I emailed and spoke with the Déljine Got'ine Government to seek permission to work on this project since the recordings are Elders from Déljine.

I chose the late Eliza Blondin's ets'ulah because of her late grandson, John Blondin. John and I had planned to create a booklet for learning Sahtúgot'jine. But he passed away. This is why I chose to work on her recordings.

After getting the recordings, I was thinking of people to interview, because ets'ulah had not been researched. I wanted to conduct interviews to hear different perspectives on ets'ulah, and learn more about the importance of why ets'ulah can help revitalize the Sahtúgot'jine language. I contacted Beshá Blondin, Eliza Blondin's daughter, and Paul Andrew.

The interview questions were decided upon in consultation from my supervisor and Dr. Nicole Beaudry. From the questions, I wanted to learn why language revitalization is important and how can this be done through ets'ulah.

I contacted my possible interviewees by phone, but because they are older than me, I provided them with some cash and tobacco before going to the questions. I asked them for their help to revive Sahtúgot'jine language, as I am working on songs in ets'ulah. They agreed because they know the importance of language revitalization and that children no longer speak our language. Both of the individual are from the Sahtú region. I chose them because of their understanding of ets'ulah, and their musical background.

Ets'ulah

I interviewed them in their homes in Yellowknife and recorded their conversations on video. The videos were then transcribed.

The reason why I am looking at Eliza Blondin's ets'ulah is to create a prototype booklet that will be a model for further research by me and Dr. Beaudry. In this prototype there will be our Elder's story, a music sheet for one of her songs, a summary in English of the transcript of her talking about her music with Dr. Beaudry and Déljne interpreter and researcher Michael Neyelle, and a full English transcript/ translation of that interview by Michael Neyelle.

The fact that we are learning in the home forms the basis of my thesis project. Ets'ulah is able to promote that very thing. This is what we all talk about in our classes. The booklet will be accompanied by digitized audio files on a USB in which an Elder will sing her song and talk about whose song it is, where it came from and why she is singing that particular song. There are various cases in Hinton's book *Bringing Our Languages Home* where she talks about parents wanting their children to grow up surrounded by their own language. We know that many parents would not be able to do this because of language loss and shame due to Residential Schools. Yet, despite great challenges, Dr. Hinton has helped families bring back their endangered languages.

The late Eliza Blondin, from Déljne, talks about the integral connection between the land and our breath and our language when she says the following:

We need the land. Every breath I take I think about knowing this is my land. I also feel in my heart that it is my land. When we talk about Grizzly Bear Mountain (Sahoyúé), Scented Grass Hill (?ehdacho), and Great Bear Lake, I know it is my land. (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, 1998)

Ets'ulah

Dr. Beaudry had sent seven digitized recordings for me to review for our future joint work. I have checked the translations of the stories of the songs.

Godí Behédágóht'e – Results

We know that a lot of work needs to be done in the field of language, and this also emerged very clearly when talking with the people that I interviewed about my language research. The interviewees both indicated the importance of community development and implementation of language revitalization.

According to Besha Blondin, “When you speak your language your mind and heart are strong, when you sing the song ets'ulah it is something that is enormous. Now it is hard because there is a lot of music in English, and it is hard. So when you speak your language it's easy for non-speakers--they can learn what ets'ulah is.”

Paul Andrew stated, “And what I am hoping for the future is like people saying, what does it mean to be a Tutcho, or this or that? And do we have a song? And look back into their history. And then create their own songs even if they don't already have one.”

Godí Ts'éhtsj - Recommendations

My main focus has been to see how these songs can contribute to the Sahtúgot'ıne language revitalization. There are future projects that can be developed for other family members and the people of the Sahtú region.

History tells us that we as people have to be in unity and listen to what our ancestors have told us. The Dene of Sahtú has always known that they are the protectors of the land, which includes all living things on the land and water.

Ets'ulah

We now have to inform our young people and teach our history in schools so that they know what was taught to us. In order to be prepared for the future of the coming generation we will have to learn what will hold them together from the past and hold them together in the future.

The young generation today has every kind of electronic technology available to them and their mastery of that new technology is amazing. They can learn to adapt it so that they can capture the past and have a great future. We are the ones to teach them the importance of all the tools they will need for their future and ours.

The importance for the survival of all the Dene is that we as people must take every opportunity offered to us to live a better life. Also we must remind the rest of Canadians that Dene people have history that they can share together.

Now is the time to be productive because there are sufficient numbers of industries on the land that will destroy who we are as people. People must learn to respect each other and the land that they are supposed to protect for our survival.

To become strong, healthy, independent Sahtú Dene we need to change the way we raise our children. With the help of Elders we must immerse our children in our communities and families. We have to take our children back to the land. As Dene we have to demand that our children be immersed into the Sahtúgot'ıne culture and language. Our children will be strong like two people.

One thing that we should all remember is Elders teaching you to slow down and enjoy the view. The lesson there is to be patient. You begin to wonder where language went and how you can get that back. It is

great to speak your own language because it gives you that knowledge that is deep within you. You just have to remember how to get it out and share it with the rest of the world because that is your gift from your Elders and your people.

The question is do you think they or you are ready? It is also said that you will know when and the answer to that is up to you.

Healing through a song is also a gift and as an individual you must want to help heal your people and help save what is left of who your people are. The identity that you carry within yourself is part of who they are and that could give you strength to help them.

You look at the life of children and young people and their suffering. You see your future through their eyes and it is sad. You have to find a way to give them faith and hope. Share the happiness you once had and help them see that there is a future for them.

I think our journey is just the glimmer that they need to start the spark to feel the fire of healing with a song.

One of the greatest things is that you as a person will be part of something wonderful. That something will be part of a surprise that you will find exciting because you will find part of you in it. The challenge is finding the courage to do so and keep on going forward through all barriers.

Along the way you find yourself asking for help from people you thought will not help. Then you begin to think that you must have helped them see how easy it is to help and feel a little bit happier about what they just did.

It is worth repeating that the greatest value we have comes from our language and culture, as they keep us together as people. When we talk about our culture in our own language we can see the expression on people's faces. It is also good that at any time when our people gather they always do an opening prayer. That has to be done at all times no matter how small the gathering may be. We as Sahtúgot'ıne people have to remind our people about the beauty of our culture and practices. We have learned from the beginning that we are not only doing this for us but the future generations to come.

Bək'ənadets'erewe - Reflection

As I began my research I noticed that we as Aboriginal people always state that we are preparing for the future generations but we do not always involve the new generations in this effort. We need to reconnect the Elders with the young people. I have learned that our people desire unity and will listen to us language advocates because we have very important information to pass on to them for our survival. The people of Délıne have always known how to protect the land. They also know that it holds all we need to rebuild our language. We now have to inform our young people, teach our history in schools and utilize every avenue that is available to us. We have to prepare for the future generations and learn together from the past to go into the future as united people. All of the information that I gathered has provided enlightenment within a structured learning process. My biggest issue is how we could increase

Ets'ulah

capacity to expand that enlightenment without a standard non-Dene structured learning process. Dr. Fishman said to start small and not to worry about the big picture because it is always going to be there.

To make a difference in our peoples' lives is to give them something to hope for, such as their children's future. Developing that hope is a learning process which necessarily involves family connections.

Initiate memories of the past of your family, people, and Dene community and nation. Strength is generated, knowing that you are relieved from thinking you do all the changing of situations yourself. When you have familial and generational support, you can hear the Elders and the parents telling you to get up and do what needs to be done to help your people, for instance revitalizing Dene languages. You find yourself having deep thoughts about how your people taught you.

There has been a lot of work on the revival of the Sahtúgot'ıne language begun by various members of the community of Délıne. Our people believe that we language activists can help them to survive and revive our Sahtúgot'ıne language. We have Elders who can contribute their time because they want to leave a legacy for their future generations. We have to continue to build partnerships with the Government of the Northwest Territories to help to revitalize our Sahtúgot'ıne language.

When you hear a song from your people you remember where you heard it. It will bring you back to the place where you grew up, on the land. This is the place where you can hear people laughing and living

Ets'ulah

in harmony with the land. You start to sing that song and listen to that song and keep in mind for whom it was created.

This is what can happen for people involved in the research work in Délı̄ne that I am proposing.

Ets'ulah

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Ets'ulah

Godí - Glossary

ʔehdacho	Scented Grass Hills
ʔerjhtí'é Behts'énadi	Literature Review
ʔerjhtí'é Hets'énáaredi	References
Bək'ənadets'erewe	Reflection
Dánj Bek'ə Eghálaidá	Methodology
Déłjne	Where the water flow, a community on the shore of Great Bear Lake
Dene Náoweré	My people's culture
Ets'ulah	Dene love song
Godí Behédágóht'e	Results
Godí Behéwéla	Contents
Godí Ts'éhtsı	Recommendations
Gonezq Agót'é Gogha	For a Better Future
Gowéré Gots'ę Godı	Context (background)
K'áowe kə	Governments
Móla ʔeʔá	White peoples' law
Nakjıne	us
Sahtúgot'jıne	People of the Déłjne
Sahtúgot'jıne Nádaketse	Strength of Déłjne
Saoyú	Grizzly Bear Mountain
Segodí	My Story
Sóot'jıne Tsíkəwı	Suffering of my people
T'akwə kədə héonjwı	Introduction

Ets'ulah

Eliza Blondin's Story

Laura Tutcho

2016



Contents

Introduction.....	2
Eliza Blondin’s Story.....	4
Sheet Music	7
Summary of Interview Transcript	8
Interview Transcript.....	9

Introduction

This book is about the singing tradition of an Elder who had lived in Délı̄ne, a community on the shores of Great Bear Lake. There are many reasons such a book can be of interest, but the main objective here is to offer to the people of Délı̄ne one path into her historical past, the song path, ɛts'ulah. The materials brought together here came mainly from recording collections of the ethnomusicologist Dr. Nicole Beaudry, made between 1988 and 1992, with this Elder who not only talked to her, but also sang a good number of songs.

This book contains a photo of the Elder, her story, sheet music, and a summary and full transcript for the session in which she sings the song. Present at the session were the Elder, Dr. Beaudry, and the Sahtúgot'ı̄ne interpreter/ researcher Michael Neyelle. It is accompanied by an audio file on a CD/USB. It aims to reflect the Elder's talking and singing voices and all the wisdom she wished to transmit to the future generations. The Elder would indicate that these recordings were useful for exactly that purpose. As a researcher, I am thankful for her generosity in helping me to understand the role they have for Dene culture and society. But as an individual from Délı̄ne, I owe it to the singers of ɛts'ulah to give back to my people through their songs and words as faithfully as I can. For sure, I will again express my gratitude to all those who help me, but I want to say right now how grateful I am for the people who worked very hard to develop these materials. Without them, none of this would ever be possible. So this book is also a tribute to them.

Why write a book about songs, especially about ets'ulah? Why not just hear the songs themselves on audio equipment? I strongly believe that songs are powerful vehicles for people's traditions. Their meaning is not always obvious at first hearing even for those of the same culture. Many Dene singers like to tell the story of their song, and how it is meaningful to them. So their words about the songs are just as important to hear. That is why the book is called *Ets'ulah*. Together, these songs and stories open the doors to Déljine's history and the inherent values in Dene culture — the relationships and behaviours of groups and individuals, people's spiritual lives, their sense of humour and capacity for rejoicing. Yes, all of that can be learned through song. But more importantly even that these things, the songs enhance the importance of learning to "listen" not only with one's ears, but also with one's heart and intelligence. "Listening" leads to "learning", which means the one is in possession of necessary tools for a harmonious life to speak in the Sahtúgot'jine way.

Books can sometimes be bothersome when you start thinking about how to put them together. There's no way you can put everything in a book. So there are several ways you can lead your readers through the information you want them to hear about. I will try my best to remain truthful to the ways of this Elder and present her thoughts. I can only hope that people will recognize something of themselves in the way I have pulled together her story and explanations.

So we will start our voyage with a bit of the story about the late Elder Eliza Blondin who lived in Déljine. She had also lived on the land and had to deal with a number of challenges and difficulties.

I will focus on her history and songs, in the sense that personal feelings are expressed through songs. When people sing ets'ulah, they are thinking about people they miss or that they love, but they're also reflecting on the beauties of the land and of their lives on the land. Ets'ulah can be remembered from old times, or can be made up on the spot, and people seem to enjoy them still today.

The Elder's stories contain all her wisdom and knowledge that needs to be transmitted from generation to generation. It would be impossible to share all the stories contained in this particular recording collection, but I will choose those that feature songs.

Eliza Blondin's Story



The late Eliza Blondin was from Délı̄ne (for a time known as 'Fort Franklin'). She was 88 years old when she passed on in 1993. She was married to the late Edward Blondin. She had 8 children. They lived a traditional way of life, fishing, trapping and hunting and surviving the harshness of the north.

She was a very traditional and strong medicine woman. She had many great skills, besides the multiple skills of a person capable of living off the land. She raised her children in a traditional Dene way, providing for them through hunting, fishing and trapping. Her greatest skills were in how to prepare hides to provide clothing and gear for the family.

Eliza was also a great story teller and sang ɛts'ulah. She had the most amazing stories and told how each song belonged to some families in the community of Délı̄ne. She provided the vision, leadership and guidance to her family and people. Educating the young about Dene languages, culture and traditions was very important to her; it is how we as Dene people will survive.

Elders like Eliza Blondin are viewed as people of wisdom and knowledge in traditional ways of knowing. Through her stories, she can tell of her people's history, where they have hunted, fished and trapped.

She spent a lifetime on the land and always shared her experiences. She would talk about travelling on the land by dog teams or by canoe. She reminisced about the past and enjoyed talking about times and people from before. She would tell of a time when people moved from place to place to follow the caribou in winter or moose in the

fall. All of her stories and songs she shared were about her life on the land with her family and friends.

The times have changed now and children no longer visit their Elders just to listen to their stories or songs. We all know that we are losing our Elders and it was through our Elders that wisdom, experience and knowledge passed down to the people. I must capture that spirit so that it can be heard through the generations.

Sheet Music

Eliza song no 34

Musical Transcript : Nicole Beaudry
Déline / Beaudry Project 1988-2015

The musical score consists of seven staves of music. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes. The first staff has a bar line over the first measure. The second staff has a '2' above the first measure of a triplet. The third staff has a bar line over the first measure and a '2' above the first measure of a triplet. The fourth staff has a bar line over the first measure and a '2' above the first measure of a triplet. The fifth staff has a bar line over the first measure and a '2' above the first measure of a triplet. The sixth staff has a bar line over the first measure and a '2' above the first measure of a triplet. The seventh staff has a bar line over the first measure and a '2' above the first measure of a triplet.

k'e éh du we _____ a a a k'e éh du we a Eeéh

k'e éh du we a a a he jo we da Eeéh

k'e éh du we se re déa e yiaah té a Heeéh

k'e éh du we a a k'e éh du we a Eeéh

eh la si ne la k'e eh du we se re di a a a a xa re si du we Heeéh

i la mi ne a ruh di laa de chi'ta go'ti ne ya a a a k'e eh du we se re di a Heeéh

k'e eh du we e yia xa se re di du we Heeéh

Summary of Interview Transcript

This summary of the Interview with Eliza Blondin was prepared by Dr. Nicole Beaudry.
Interviewer: Nicole Beaudry. Interpreter: Michael Neyelle.

Eliza Blondin Story #18 with SONG # 34

Once there were some people traveling in the forest, and they heard the sound of ets'ulah. It sounded really nice. At that time, they pulled their own sleds, they had no dogs. They made sleds from moose or caribou hides with the hair still on. That's what they used to pull their belongings.

So they were walking and walking, pulling their sleds. They followed each other, and as they walked, they heard this sound of ets'ulah coming from the woods behind them. Someone said: "Who is that? Why can't they come and meet us?" Lots of people were traveling together, following each other because they were on a lake.

Eliza sings **SONG # 34**

That's how the song went. Then they saw a moose coming from the bush. Everyone turned around to look at it. It was the moose singing that song. He was saying, "I love to walk, that's why I'm called *K'eʔehdúwe*. I'm called *K'eʔehdúwe*. I'm walking through, this is *K'eʔehdúwe*."

That's why he was singing the love song. Moose don't sleep, they walk all the time. He called himself *K'eʔehdúwe* because he loved to walk. He was singing, saying that his name was *K'eʔehdúwe* and people started walking towards him. He sang when he saw people pulling sleds.

Long ago, all animals were people, so they sang really well. They would also dance and feel happy. They had songs for their people but when they met different people, they sang different songs, out of respect for them. That's how animals were. They knew really good songs.

Interview Transcript

What follows is the full transcript of the interview with Eliza Blondin in which she sings Song # 34. interviewer: Dr. Nicole Beaudry. Interpreter / Transcriber: Michael Neyelle.

STORY # 18 [About moose singing an ets'ulah]

Eliza

(Slavey) Once there was someone travelling in the woods. There was a sound of love song. It sound real nice.

That time they only pulled sleds cause there were no dogs. They make sleds from moose or caribou hide with hair that's what they've used for pulling around.

They were walking and travelling pulling the sled. They all followed one another pulling sleds, there was a sound of love song coming from the woods. "Who is that, why can't they come out to us?" someone said. There were really lots of people travelling together on the lake.

(00:33:33 -- 00:35:01) SONG # 34

(Slavey) (laughter) That's how it was sang.

Then there was a moose. That was coming from the bush, so all the people pulling sleds and with snowshoes all turned that way. It was a moose singing.

Translate to her first.

Michael (00:35:43)

(English) This is a long time ago, when they were walking in the bush, like they were...

When they travelled, they always had dog packs with them, dogs, with dog packs, with them, and the people would also have a sled, pulling them... pulling a sled, and whenever they cross water or something, they would go in a straight line.

And, that's what they were doing. They came upon this open lake and so there's water there so they had to walk in a straight line eh? But they kept on hearing this person singing. And they said : "Who is that singing? Why doesn't he come out and join em'?" That's when they got out in the open – that person could see them and this is the song he sang. And, here, once he was finished, it was the moose that was singing this song!

Nicole (00:36:55)

(English) A moose was singing to them? (M. Ya) Was he mocking them or was he just saying "Come over"?

Michael (00:37:02)

(Slavey) What was he saying? Granny...

Eliza (00:37:05)

(Slavey) He probably seen them, pulling sled and sang.

"I love to walk, that's why I'm called *K'e?ehdúwe*. I'm call *K'e?ehdúwe*, I'm walking through, this is *K'e?ehdúwe*"

That's how he was singing the love song. Moose don't sleep, they walk all the time, he call himself, *K'e?ehdúwe* cause he loves to walk. He was singing and said he's called *K'e?ehdúwe* and people were walking towards him. He said that cause he seen people pulling sleds.

Michael (00:37:56)

(Slavey) He's not afraid of them?

Eliza

(Slavey) Yes, it was that way for him. I guess it was meant for it to be that way. Long ago all animals were people. That's why. Even chickens, ptarmigans were people too. That's what was said.

Michael (00:38:24)

(English) At that time, the wildlife, the creatures, they were like man, that time, they could talk. I think in this case, he was mocking them, like, he says he likes to walk. That's why they call him *K'ea tha* [Eliza corrects him: *K'ei tue*] Cause he likes to walk – that's what he's singing to these people, that's what he was doing.

(Slavey) untranslated??? (00:39:02)

Eliza

(Slavey) *K'eʔehdúwe* I'm called, he said.

Michael

(Slavey) He sang good.

Eliza

(Slavey) Yes, he sang good.

Michael

(Slavey) He sings really good.

Michael

(English) Sings really good this moose!

Nicole

(English) I guess so! It's a complicated song!

Eliza

(Slavey) Yes. All animals were people so they sang real good, the dance and happiness were all theirs. Sometimes when different people join, they sing different songs. That's how the animals were. So when they join it's different.

Michael (00:39:42)

(English) In those days, she said, they would have their songs, the animals, they would have their songs for certain people, they would keep that song for that certain people, (N. Oh, ok, they didn't sing for anybody? They sang for... purposely.) No, for...probably a certain tribe. But once a different tribe comes in – different people come in and join them, then they would change their music (N. Ok, they would sing something different?) Ya, in respect I guess, to... (N. Out of respect?) Ya. That's why the animals were respected as one of the... good singers, like they know some good songs and they bring out real good songs.