

## Land, Language and Culture in Denendeh: Making Connections with Dene Nahjo



An Interview with Dëneze Nakehk'ó

*The following is an interview between Hayden King, Executive Director at Yellowhead Institute and Dëneze Nakehk'ó, founding member of Dene Nahjo and a Research Fellow with Yellowhead.*

**We go back a few years, Dëneze, and you're a Research Fellow at Yellowhead, but can you talk a little bit about yourself and maybe how you got your policy education?**

**DËNEZE:** I guess it's in my family. My father Jim held many political positions, he was a former Premier of NWT before division. He's not in politics anymore but it's like the godfather quote, "everytime you try to leave, they keep pulling you back in." So when I was a kid, he was busy; but us kids would play under the meeting tables at Dene Assemblies and through osmosis I sort of absorbed the politics.

**The injustice facing Indigenous people was pretty clear to me from a young age. My mom was a strong Dene woman, too, she kept the language and made sure all us kids have Dene names.**

Later, when I was figuring out my own path, I was inspired by Gary Farmer. Someone that encouraged Indigenous people to tell authentic Indigenous Stories. I got into journalism and broadcasting; I wanted to be a documentary filmmaker but ended up getting into community radio. I worked at ATPN for a while, too. But those were challenging places sometimes, very colonial, working with people that didn't understand their privilege and so didn't understand my perspective. From there I got into education, which was another colonial setting!

So it was really during Idle No More where a lot of us got into actions—round dances in the middle of winter—that kind of thing. And it really put things into perspective for me. So a group of us, Amos Scott, Kyla Kakfwi Scott, my sister Melaw, Mandee McDonald, Nina Larson, we rode the wave and we organized out of those efforts and created Dene Nahjo.

**I've been following, and really been a fan of Dene Nahjo as long as its existed, I think. But there may be some Indigenous people, especially in the South, that don't know about the organization. What is Dene Nahjo?**

**DĒNEZE:** Dene Nahjo, we actually misspelled it, but it's a concept. Old people would say that if young people showed adult qualities, that they were smart and capable, they were Dene Nahjo. Land, language and culture forever is our mission. We're interested in connections and reconnections. We know that our communities have been assaulted by colonization, wave upon wave. So it was good to have this group to deal with it all, but also it's a sort of colonial support network for all the members.

**To help people understand what we're about, I think it's important to talk about our governance structure. Like all things we try to do, it's pretty Dene. In the old ways we'd have our warriors, harvesters, plant people, medicine people, and mostly women, too. But we'd all come together to make decisions. The people with the expertise would then take the lead after a decision. It's a style we've adopted at Dene Nahjo.**

We are not experts like they were then, but we have people in hide tanning, communication, climate action, jewelry, and so on. And when an idea comes forward the person with it takes the lead and the rest support. That's sort of the definition of leadership for us.

When we go into programming we wanted to make the connections between land, language and culture. Some of our first programming was around urban hide tanning. We reclaimed space in the city (Yellowknife) and set up a Dene camp just to work on hides. School kids would come through and it really helps normalize the process, that this is not a strange thing to see, it's right and good. And really we just wanted to create a safe space for Dene, too. Most of our spaces in society are colonial and violent; they are set up by old white guys that have excluded Indigenous people and women, too, whether the healthcare system, the justice system, education system, churches. All these spaces that are supposed to serve the public are not for Indigenous people. We always have to prove ourselves in them. So the hide tanning, and all our programming, is geared towards creating those spaces.

**There is something inherently political about this work, making those safe spaces and connections, as you call them. But are you, or Dene Nahjo, a part of the more "formal" kind of politics in the North, Denendeh, or NWT?**

**DĒNEZE:** Well, sort of. I mean, I tried to run in the 2015 territorial elections but lost to an old white guy. That was a big loss for me! But it was a blessing in disguise because I don't think I would have done well. As a John Trudell says, we live in a society where our spirits get eaten. I think that's especially true in politics. It happens to a lot of people, too, but Indigenous people in particular. So I took a step back and re-adjusted. Instead of engaging in that type of politics, I focus—and Dene Nahjo focuses—on leadership and supporting youth leaders.

Another one of our programs in addition to urban hide tanning, is a leadership series developed with Matt Wildcat. We take this programming into small communities and really we just want to work with young Indigenous leaders and help them realize that a lot of the answers they're looking for are within themselves and within their communities.

**We all know, we all have this strong feeling, a gut feeling, that something is wrong, or at least not right. But it's hard to articulate what that is. So we work to make those connections, too, and work to help young people articulate those feelings and also the solutions that we know are there.**

We do some policy engagement, I guess you'd say, too. For over a year we worked with some like-minded organizations, *Our Voices* in the Yukon and in Nunavut, to produce a report that was in response to the federal government's proposed Arctic and Northern Policy Framework. It was called "We Are One Mind", and in the end we made twenty-five recommendations and a methodology for addressing colonialism, which is multi-pronged: youth, government, policy.

**But at the end of the day, we just want to be Dene. That's our approach. We've been called young and fresh and innovative. But we're really just old, old school. Maybe in this era of reconciliation, that approach seems fresh.**

**In this era of reconciliation, that sort of "discovery" of Indigenous communities and approaches can be a bit bewildering, even exhausting at times. In the big picture, it's a minor challenge. But are there challenges that you and Dene Nahjo face when it comes to land, language and culture?**

**DĒNEZE:** Colonialism. Other than colonialism? It's colonial attitudes that have made their way into our communities.

If you think about it, the world powers sought to destroy us and clear us off our territories. Our ancestors survived that first wave of attack. But the second wave was assimilation and it's still affecting us. Hayden, you and I, are speaking in the colonizers language. It's impacting us today.

**Still, we survived eradication and assimilation. If you have Indigenous blood pumping through your veins right now you're the strongest of the strong. That's an amazing thing and [something we] should be proud of. The world's superpowers couldn't and didn't defeat us. The one thing that can, is our own people. It's sad but a reality.**

I've been approached by people saying I'm an uppity Indian and to stop causing trouble. Some people are comfortable, or they're in the resource industry and Dene Nahjo is sometimes seen as promoting something threatening. But being alive as an Indian is a political statement. That's why the work is so important and you know what, it's not just for Indigenous people, but for everyone. I do this work and I see how colonialism impacts me but also non-Native people. The society that we live in isn't conducive to the human spirit.

And so we talk about decolonization and all these big words. The work Yellowhead did in "Land Back" is so important but the conversation has been going on for 527 years! To be honest, we don't talk about decolonization, we talk about things like volunteering, helping out. It's actually a Dene law, to help out. When you break it all down from a Dene perspective, decolonization just means getting on the land, hunting, tanning hides. It just means being Dene, and helping others do that, too.

**I remember asking an Elder one time what it meant to be Anishinaabe and she told me it meant work. Or, to work hard for the community. I think there are probably some universal Indigenous laws! So we have these challenges, but also really good things, too?**

**DĒNEZE:** Yes! Fresh moose ribs on the fire, fish you eat right from the net, new moccasins that have just been beaded. There are a lot of good things to fight for. Some of our communities here, language is still so strong, in the Tlicho region and in Nunavut, it's still there.

There is a sort of irony of colonization that helps make us strong, too. In the North we operate at a different speed. By the time colonizers got here they really had their stuff

together; they tested their plans out on First Nations in the South, so they were efficient up here. But we still have our territories; the same energy and transportation infrastructure that exists in the South doesn't exist here and that's a hindrance to resource development because it's more expensive to make those mines. That's ultimately a good thing! I can go five minutes outside my office and make a fire. If I did that in Ottawa or Toronto, I'd get a citation.

**We live in an interesting area, which challenges the idea of what it means to be a Canadian. As Dene we've done that: challenge Canadians.**

I know that some of our lawyers have talked about the Dene Declaration and how it inspired, at least in part, the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*. Dene were one of the first to define themselves as a nation. The Berger Inquiry, which was really just our voices, changed the landscape for Indigenous rights. These are good things, too.

Dene all have many roles to play. Some of us do policy or politics; that might be the Dene Nation. Dene Nahjo does not want to take over from the Dene Nation or anything though, they do their work and it's important. Just like the regional Dene governments and treaty organizations, and so on. But there are gaps, and that's what Dene Nahjo tries to fill. We get in the gaps and make those connections.