

Algonquin Anishinabeg vs. The Algonquins of Ontario: Development, Recognition & Ongoing Colonization

By Shady Hafez

Before beginning, it is important to note I am not a representative of the Algonquin Nation. I am a concerned community member who belongs to a community within the Nation, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, and only speak as such.

THE ALGONQUINS OF ONTARIO (AOO) — an entity recently created by the province of Ontario to support the settlement of the Algonquins of Ontario land claim — have recently begun the process of creating a residential development, **Tewin**, on the outskirts of Ottawa. The development began as a private land purchase by the AOO and they are now seeking the City of Ottawa's approval to begin developing the land in partnership with Taggart Group, a private development company. The development seeks to build roughly 45,000 homes and create a residential community that is in line with "Algonquin principles and teachings." (It is unclear which Anishinabe teachings tell us to build homes and shelter for profit).

This real estate development deal, and the recognition from the City of Ottawa, are just the latest example of the threat that the AOO represents to Algonquins.

"The Algonquins of Ontario"

Beyond the concerns that some city officials have raised regarding the suitability and sustainability of the development project in comparison to other proposed developments in the city, 10 out of the 11 recognized and established Algonquin communities that make up the Algonquin Nation have expressed deep concerns with the development and legitimacy of the AOO as a whole. (For context, the Algonquin Nation's land base is on both sides of the Ontario-Québec border: Nine communities on the Québec side and two on the Ontario side. One of these Ontario-based communities is Pikwakanagan, which is leading the AOO process).

In a letter penned by Chief Dylan Whiteduck of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg on behalf of Algonquin communities in Québec, Whiteduck reiterated the position that "The Algonquins of Ontario are an entity established to negotiate with the Crown on behalf of numerous Ontario communities, the vast majority of which are not recognized as First Nations. Kitigan Zibi and other Québec Algonquin Anishinabe First Nations do not recognize the 'AOO' as a legitimate representative of the constitutionally held rights of the majority of Algonquin Anishinabe."

This is not the first time the Algonquin Nation has expressed immense concern with the AOO, particularly the inclusion of 9 non-status Algonquin communities within the AOO land claim and the overall membership criteria of these communities. Multiple collective statements questioning the legitimacy of the AOO and of the AOO land claim have been

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made, and some Algonquin Nation communities have commissioned their own research **exposing major flaws** with the genealogical approach to membership. Research undertaken by the **Algonquin Nation Secretariat**, uncovered that nearly half of the eligible voters within the AOO base their membership on a genealogical connection to distant ancestors from the 1600-1700s, some of whom are likely not Algonquin but rather Abenaki. (Daryll Leroux reinforced some of these findings in his recent text, **Distorted Descent**).

Whose Land Claim?

In addition to the concerns around membership, since the **formation of the AOO** in 2004, all member communities of the Algonquin Nation, except for The Algonquins of Pikwakanagan's leadership, have raised concerns around the land claim process, which seeks to negotiate, "modify" Algonquin rights, and create "certainty" of land tenure within the Ontario portion of the shared territory of the Algonquin Nation, and second, the inclusion of communities in this process that the Algonquin Nation does not recognize.

It is important to note that although the AOO asserts that the land claim process does not involve the extinguishment of title and will not affect claims that Algonquins on the Québec side may have, there are still unanswered questions here.

Longstanding critical perspectives on the comprehensive land claims process - and the fact that the federal government is revising the process after years of resistance - should give the AOO pause in negotiations. In fact, any claims to "certainty" are exaggerated without the consultation and consent of the majority of title holders in the region.

How could there be "certainty" if Algonquin communities on the Québec side of the Ottawa River can proceed with their own land claims over the exact same territory?

Communities & Kinship

In response to these mounting concerns, and this housing development specifically, Chief of Pikwakanagan, Wendy Jocko, as well as the Ottawa representative of the AOO, Lynn Clouthier, **responded** with a call for economic development. They implied that Indigenous people need to participate in the accumulation of capital and property in order to achieve reconciliation and decolonization. But more to the point here, both have actually suggested that Algonquins opposed to the inclusion of non-status communities and individuals are colonial-minded, arguing that we need to liberate ourselves from this way of thinking to rebuild our nation to be inclusive of those who have been left out.

While the use of this language may seem liberatory to the unacquainted observer, we need to be deeply concerned by the co-optation of the language of liberation in pursuit of colonial objectives, which include the disintegration of our self-determining governance systems and nations.

This is exactly what the AOO is doing. The AOO would have us believe that by excluding from those left behind by colonial legislation from our nation, the Algonquin communities in Québec are overly concerned with blood quantum or status as understood by the Indian Act.

This is not true, rather, this is a matter of nationhood and self-determination.

The creation of the AOO and the creation of and inclusion of the 9 non-status communities was done without the participation, consultation, and consent of the majority of the Algonquin Nation. How can the AOO claim to be operating within the spirit and values of the Algonquin peoples, when they refuse to include the existing Algonquin Nation in the process of reintroducing members who were marginalized from our communities? Where is our kinship, or even basic relationships?

The AOO frames the Algonquin Nation as unjustifiably skeptical of communities that are not reserves or are not recognized by the Indian Act, yet fails to acknowledge that many of the Algonquin communities in Québec have gone through similar histories of non-recognition by the state, even being referred to as squatters on their own territory for failing to move to federally-recognized reserves such as Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg and Timiskaming First Nation.

Regardless of this lack of recognition by the state, the Algonquin Nation still acknowledges these communities as our own and as members of our nation. We see ourselves in these communities and we recognize our nationhood, identity, and culture in them. What the Algonquin Nation has made fundamentally clear, is that we do not recognize ourselves in the identities and cultures of the communities created under the AOO.

The AOO claims to have since revised their membership criteria to address this concern yet have still failed to include the Algonquin Nation in the development of membership criteria.

It is undeniable that individuals have lost connections to community and culture due to the direct effects of colonization and displacement. But how can you redevelop and foster that reconnection without including communities who still hold the language, identity, culture, and land-based practice that makes our nation what it is? Some communities within the Algonquin Nation are still fluent speakers of Anishinaabemowin, hold our wampum belts, live on the land year-round and continue the practice of traditional governance and decision making.

But somehow, through all of this, the AOO would still assert we are too colonial-minded to think about identity in a decolonial fashion.

New Forms of Colonization

The AOO and the danger it poses to the Algonquin Nation needs to be exposed for what is: a failed-from-the-start attempt at nation-building and a process that has seen an organization created without the consent of the Algonquin Nation that is actively leading negotiations in our name for our lands, rights and title. The only legitimacy the AOO has is from the state (which has an interest in extinguishing title and they apparently don't care who does that extinguishing) not from the Algonquin people, and as such every action they take is a slight against Algonquin sovereignty, liberation and jurisdiction.

Even Pikwakanagan's community members — that sole supportive Algonquin community — have taken issue with the AOO and its land claim process. In a 2016 referendum to gauge support for the agreement-in-principle (AIP), community members demonstrated an overwhelming lack of support, **voting 243 opposed to 87 in favour**. Yet their voices were overshadowed by 3,182 in-favour votes cast by members of the non-status communities in the tripartite ratification vote.

This means that communities who are not recognized as Algonquin by the greater membership of the Algonquin Nation voted to accept an AIP that they negotiated on our behalf, even though the only legitimate community within the AOO opposed the agreement.

This is a clear and direct violation of Algonquin sovereignty and jurisdiction by outsiders. Regardless of what those communities say for themselves, they are not in a position to negotiate on behalf of a nation that does not recognize them.

This brings us back to the Tewn housing development and the rush to accept the proposed project by the City of Ottawa. In a **superficial nod to reconciliation**, the city is cozying up to the AOO and will likely approve their proposed development.

It isn't a surprise that the government of Canada, the province of Ontario and now the City of Ottawa are legitimizing an entity created with the sole purpose of extinguishing title (whether they call it "certainty" or not). Are we really expected to believe that restitution is about working with corporate developers to turn our unceded lands into a commodity for profit?

If we continue to allow the AOO to operate without challenging its legitimacy we risk the further marginalization of the Algonquin Nation. This represents a new phase of colonization, a proxy campaign using self-interested outsiders claiming to be us. At stake is our self-determination, access to our increasingly dispossessed land base, and our very identity.

CITATION

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