

NEGOTIATING TURNOUR ISLAND

Diaspora, memories and contemporary land claims in British Columbia

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Abstract

The territory of the Tlowitsis Nation spans the coastal area of Northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Seasonal travel routes, food processing spots, burial and cultural sites and other named places extend across the entire territory. Since the turn of the 20th Century Karlukwees, located on remote Turnour Island, became a central settlement for the Tlowitsis Nation. In the early 1960s the Nation was displaced from Karlukwees; this has led to community members becoming culturally, as well as physically, removed from their traditional territories. A rising urban population with little attachment to these lands has reduced the opportunity and ability for members to take an active and informed role in their community. This paper describes the Tlowitsis relationship to its island-based homeland. Further, it explores how contemporary efforts to reclaim territories and mobilise the community within the context of the Canadian government land claims negotiations help to shape the ideal of what their island's past means for the future of the Nation.

Keywords

Tlowitsis Nation; place-based memory; community-based research; British Columbia Treaty Process; aboriginal community

Introduction

Since the time of first contact with Europeans, First Nations across British Columbia have endured profound change that continues to affect individuals, families and communities to the current day (Amnesty International, 2010; Harris, 2002; Woolford 2005). The influence of colonisation has had a lasting impact on almost every aspect of the social, economic, and cultural life of British Columbia's First Nation communities. For the Tlowitsis, the late 18th century marked the beginning of a gradual displacement and the imposition of a powerful colonial mentality that continues to this day to shape the Nation's relationship to its homeland and, in particular, the island community of Karlukwees.

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This paper describes the Tlowitsis' relationship to their homeland prior to contact. It explores the changes that have occurred since, leading to the conditions that provoked a complete diaspora of the community in the 1960s. This paper will finally examine contemporary efforts using a range of community engagement processes to reclaim territories and mobilise the community within the context of the Canadian government's land claims negotiations, and explore how members of the Nation navigate the complex relationship between the idealised homeland and the political context of treaty.

The Tlowitsis

The Tlowitsis are a Kwakwaka'wakw speaking people. Their ancestral homeland encompasses an expansive area of Northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia and adjoining mainland inlets (Figure 1). The Kwakwaka'wakw language is part of the Northern Branch of the Wakashan language family spoken today by 30 politically autonomous groups formerly referred to as the Kwakwaka'wakw. Today these groups are collectively known as the Kwakwaka'wakw (MacNair, 2004).

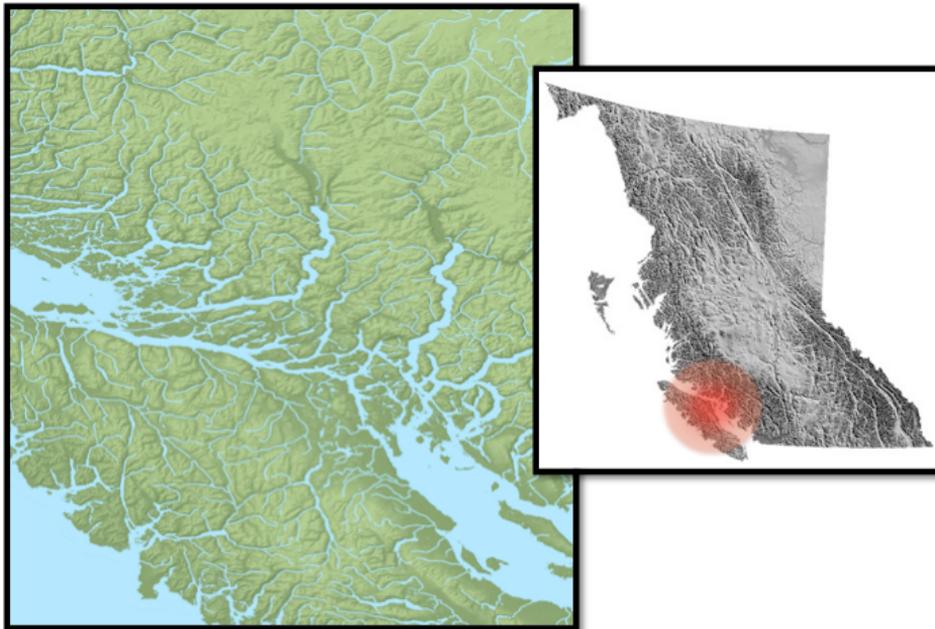


Figure 1: Map of Tlowitsis Territories (©Tlowitsis Nation 2010)

Geography

The Tlowitsis homeland is composed of a mosaic of islands, freshwater lakes, rivers and streams rich in a variety of seasonally available natural resources and ecological diversity (Turner and Bell, 1973). Prior to contact with Europeans in the 18th Century, the Tlowitsis people lived a life of settled mobility, with seasonal movements involving a number of locations and directed by resource availability and cultural activities (Galois, 1994). The primary feature of the Tlowitsis territory is water, and much of the Tlowitsis

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relationship to the environment revolved around this resource, both as a mode of travel and as a source of food. Tlowitsis people maintained a close relationship with numerous islands throughout the territory on a stewardship, economic, cultural and spiritual level. Places of significance – burial sites, resource areas, food processing sites and seasonal villages – extend across the entire island-based territory and were occupied at various times throughout the year in conjunction with these seasonal resource harvesting patterns (see Figure 2).

A critical relationship with the environment related directly to food: how, where and when to get it, and what to do to ensure that it was plentiful the next time it was needed. Tlowitsis subsistence activities adhered to a seasonal calendar divided into four lunar units that began in April and continued through late November (Turner and Lowen, 1998). Locally adapted ecological knowledge and responsive harvesting techniques supported a rich livelihood based on a broad range of resources (Galois, 1994). Ocean resources included salmon, halibut, sea lion, seals, crabs, clams, abalone and seaweed. Land-based harvesting included cedar bark, roots, pitch, berries and other seasonal plant foods and medicines, while ungulates, black bear, smaller trapped game and migratory birds were harvested according to the reproductive cycles of individual species (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2008). Harvesting practices supported the acquisition of a diverse range of locally available resources, while extensive trade and social ties with neighbouring groups allowed Tlowitsis members and their families to expand their resource base by obtaining resources located outside their local territories (see Cranmer Webster, 2001).

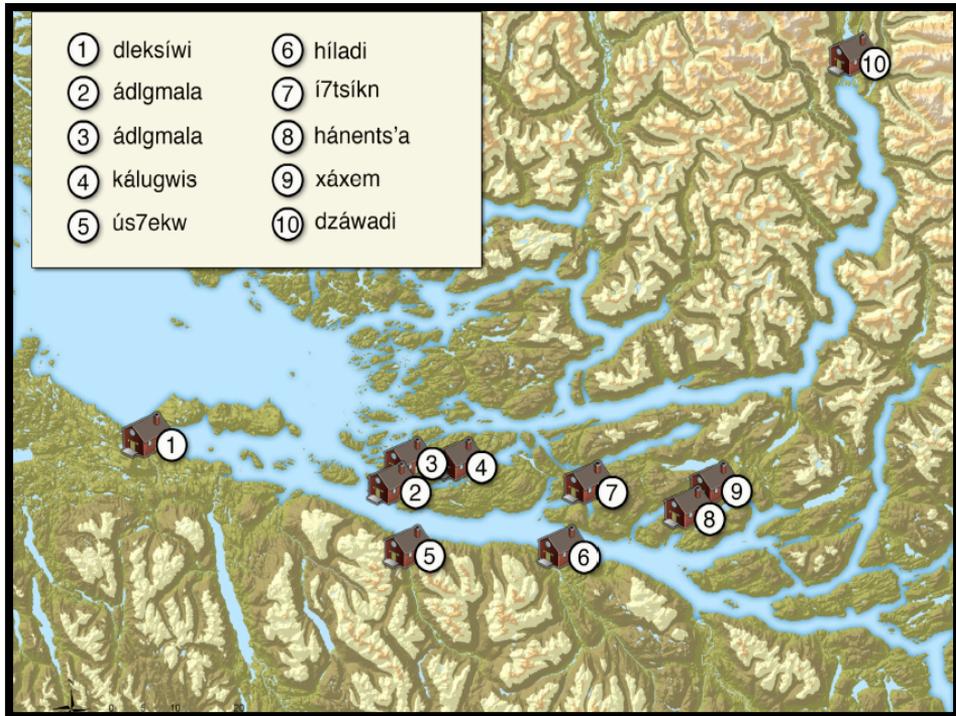


Figure 2: Map of Pre-Contact Tlowitsis Nation Settlements (©Tlowitsis Nation 2010)

Social and political organisation

The use and management of lands and resources were subject to rigid cultural protocols (Cranmer, 2009). Rights over resource usage were regulated through *numaym*, the fundamental social and political unit within Kwakwaka'wakw groups, which played a fundamental role in the pre-contact sustenance economy:

Each tribe was made up of a number (usually between four and six) of smaller social units called numayms. These were primarily kinship groups; in a sense, extended families... Each numaym contained both titleholders and commoners, the latter group being the 'house-men' of the chief. The numaym system acted as a set of ranked positions, each associated with a name and certain privileges. (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2008: 6-7)

Each *numaym* traced descent from an original ancestor as well as place of origin and owned its houses in the winter village site of Kalukwees on Turnour Island. Access to resource areas was regulated by membership in a *numaym*, and sometimes these rights were restricted to specific resources at particular places, as "each descent group or *numaym* held various resource locations for fishing, hunting, and gathering" (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2008: 6).

Despite emphasis on proprietary rights, sharing was a critical component of pre-contact relationships among and between Kwakwaka'wakw groups in this region (Mitchell and Donald, 2001). One example is the annual eulachon fishery at Knight Inlet. This annual spring harvest brought together families from a number of Kwakwaka'wakw groups together for the common purpose of making eulachon grease. This seasonal activity provided Tlowitsis families with an essential food source and valuable trading item for the entire year. At the Knight Inlet fishery at Dzawadi on the Klinaklini River, eulachon fishermen from 24 *numaym* belonging to nine groups are reported to have assembled here to fish (Mitchell and Donald, 2001: 26).

Although Tlowitsis maintained a distinct political identity and territorial boundaries, they were interconnected physically with neighbouring groups by waterways that form the large number of islands in the area, as well as culturally through language, marriage, trade, feasting and potlatching (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2008). Potlatches brought together communities for extended periods and involved the redistribution of wealth and social status, as well as the transfer of songs dances, stories and names (Frideres, 1998).

The colonial disconnect

Contact with Europeans first occurred in Tlowitsis territories during the late 18th Century. British and Spanish excursions took place along the East Coast of Vancouver Island in July 1791. The following year, exploration of Tlowitsis territories intensified. A Spanish expedition led by Alcala Galiano and Cayetano Valdes in their ships, the *Sutil* and *Mexicana*, sailed north, following the eastern shore of Johnstone Strait, surveying a number of inlets and channels and identifying the locations of local Indigenous communities (Wagner, 1933, cited in Kennedy and Bouchard, 2008). This point in time marks the beginning of irreversible social change that continues to affect the Nation today. The inextricable link between the decline of coastal indigenous populations and

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the colonial surveying, delineation and apportionment of British Columbia cannot be underestimated (Harris 2002). This is particularly true in the Tlowitsis case. The influx of European settlement placed increasing pressure on colonial governments to settle the 'native land question'. Incipient settler attitudes during this period viewed the vast territories occupied and utilised for thousands of years as *terra nullius* that needed to be transformed by more effective, 'modern' land uses (Harris, 2002). These dominant views were transformed in a process of reserve creation that confined Aboriginal communities to small geographically defined Indian Reserves governed by the terms of the Indian Act and thus effectively displacing them from their resource-rich ancestral territories (Tennant, 1990; Woolford, 2002). Indian Reserves remain a legacy to the British and Canadian governments' colonial policies developed during the 1830s to create and maintain separation, both socially and spatially, between First Nations and non-Aboriginal populations (Bell et al, 2005; Peters, 2005).

During the fall of 1879 the Indian Reserve Commission began to designate reserve lands for Tlowitsis. Tlowitsis were by no means dormant throughout the process of reserve allocations. Persistent calls from Tlowitsis leaders for the protection of Turnour Island and assurance of rights to places of cultural, economic and spiritual significance, fell upon deaf ears. Government representatives were not willing, and in many cases not even mandated, to entertain Tlowitsis requests for the expansion of existing or addition of lands reserved for Tlowitsis (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2008).

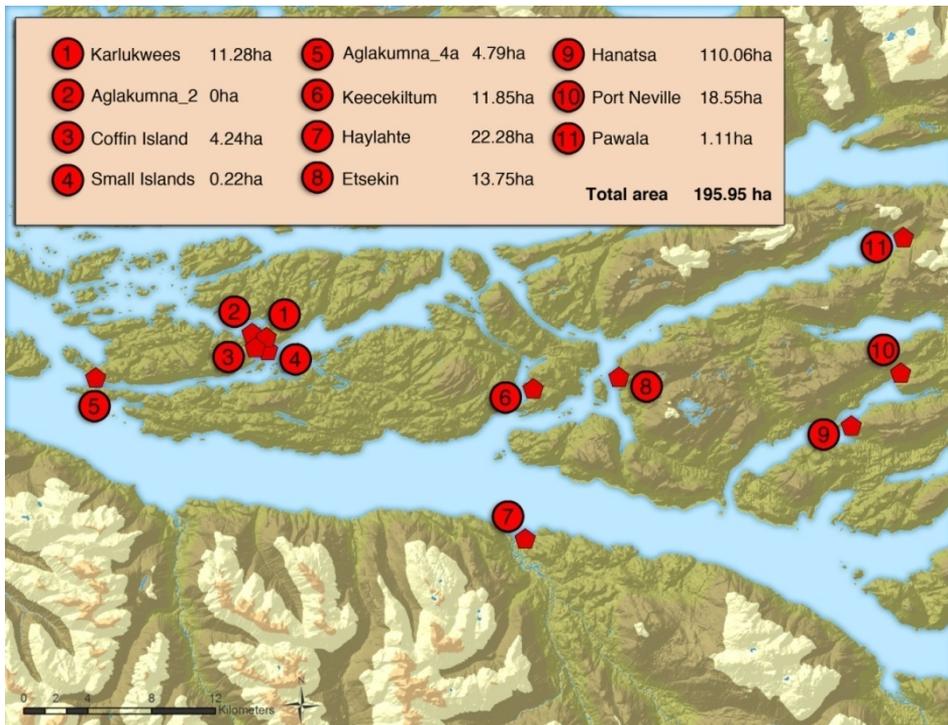


Figure 3: Map of Tlowitsis Nation Indian Reserves (©Tlowitsis Nation 2010)

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Despite the range of territories and resources utilised by the Nation prior to contact, only 11 reserves were allocated through a process that did not consult Tlowitsis leadership. Many of these reserves are tiny in size (less than a few hundred square metres) and located in remote and inaccessible settings - for example, one of the reserves is a desolate rock positioned in the middle of a tidal channel between two islands. According to the current Tlowitsis Nation Chief, a primary reason for these marginal allocations was the vehement opposition of hereditary chiefs during the 1920s:

That's the reason why we got so little land. Other groups weren't fighting back, but our people were. When the reserves were handed down, we got hardly anything. (Tlowitsis Nation Chief, p.c March 2010)

The physical dispersion of these reserves is conveyed in Figure 3. Not only is this dispersion expressed in terms of the distance between reserves, but also in the lack of access to critical infrastructure and transportation networks. Even on individual reserves, land title is not contiguous. Placement of the reserves in relative isolation has left these areas at a significant disadvantage for community cohesion, as well as development.

The ancestral winter village Karlukwees, located on Turnour Island, emerged as the primary residential community for the Tlowitsis Nation during the early 20th century. Today Karlukwees is an abandoned and decaying shell of its former self, yet it persists as an idealised image in the minds of the now geographically dispersed Tlowitsis community. This next section provides historical context on the brief period preceding the dispersal of the Nation's members and their families from the island in the late 1960s. In 1890, Karlukwees became a federally funded Indian Reserve and the primary residence for many of the Nation's families. By the 1920s, the village had become a vibrant community and centre of trade, located within the heart of an emerging coastal economy. There were abundant employment opportunities in commercial fishing and logging. Seasonal work in a range of industries was common among many members of the community and allowed people to maintain employment year-round. A store, a day school and regular visits from the hospital ship supported the emergence of a vibrant island community (see Figure 4). During the 1960s, conditions at Karlukwees became increasingly difficult for Tlowitsis families. Federal policy legislated the mandatory attendance of Aboriginal children at residential school, resulting in the (sometimes) forcible extraction of children from their homes and relocation to residential schools located throughout the province. Economic downturns both in the fishing and forestry sectors resulted in fewer locally available jobs and contributed to the relocation of some members from the village to cities and towns throughout the province in search of work. Despite these challenges, a number of families remained at Karlukwees well into the mid 1960s.

During this period, the government introduced a series of policies aimed at deliberately relocating geographically remote, island-dwelling, Aboriginal communities. These were designed to cut the administrative costs of delivering government services to these groups and were given legislative power under the Indian Act. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) explains, the overarching goal of this resettlement scheme was to centralise Aboriginal people in urban centres for the purpose of reducing the costs of the administration and delivery of services such as health, education and welfare (Canada, 1996). In the case of two Kwakwaka'wakw groups, the Gwa'Sala and Nakwaxda'xw, these "administrative relocations" reflected coercive tactics of the federal government to expedite centralisation – namely, the threat to cut funding for

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housing, schools and services unless communities agreed to abandon their ancestral village sites (Canada, 1996). While less violent than forcibly relocating children to residential schools, the centralisation of essential services was an effective mechanism for stimulating a massive emigration and concomitant urbanisation of remote rural Aboriginal people. In the mid 1960s, the Tlowitsis were subjected to this policy through a series of actions taken by the federal government. The day school and the hospital ship at Karlukwees were both cancelled - two principal factors that enabled the Nation's families to remain in its island location. With no prospect for schooling and severely limited access to health care, the Nation's families left.



Figure 4: Photograph of Karlukwees (1957). ©Tlowitsis Nation 2010.

Former residents recall the decision to leave Karlukwees as not so much a choice, but a compulsory exodus from their ancestral home. Conversations with Tlowitsis elders reveal that a significant factor motivating people to relocate was the desire to access education for their children:

We never wanted to leave our village, we had no choice. Our family had to leave because there was no place to get schooling when they shut the school down. That was the reason why people moved outta there [Karlukwees]. We never wanted to leave. We enjoyed our lives there. You'd lived off the fat of the land. You'd just have to go down the beach to get food. Everything we needed was there. (Tlowitsis Nation elder, p.c April 2009).

By the early 1970s, the last remaining members had left the island to new locations throughout Western Canada and beyond. This final emigration marked the beginning of a period of sustained social, cultural and physical disconnection that continues to affect the Nation today.

Contemporary community

Today Tlowitsis faces a set of complex and interrelated challenges that resulted directly from the movement away from Karlukwees. These challenges are impacted by territorial dispossession, physical displacement, multigenerational urban dispersion and socio-cultural disintegration of the community. Of the 11 reserves allocated by the federal government, none are inhabited today (Table 1). With no viable land-base to return to, the majority of Tlowitsis members are now dispersed throughout five urban areas of British Columbia: Vancouver, Victoria, Campbell River, Port Hardy and Alert Bay.

Tlowitsis Nation Registered Population	
Registered Males On Tlowitsis Reserves	0
Registered Females On Tlowitsis Reserves	0
Registered Males On Other Reserves	34
Registered Females On Other Reserves	43
Registered Males Off Reserve	133
Registered Females Off Reserve	159
Total Registered Population	372

Table 1: Tlowitsis Population Statistics as of December, 2009. Source: INAC (2009).

Impacts of urbanisation

Since the final exodus of families from Karlukwees, Tlowitsis members have become territorially alienated from their ancestral homeland, experiencing varying levels of social isolation and cultural disconnection. Multiple generations of Tlowitsis have grown up almost entirely off-reserve with little connection to Tlowitsis culture or other members of their community. An increasing number of the Nation's members have limited knowledge and experience of their territories and resources and lack traditional, historical and cultural knowledge. Today, Kwakwala is spoken predominantly among a small group of elders and a limited number of the Nation's youth. A recent report by the Environics Institute released in April 2010 suggests that this trend is widespread throughout Aboriginal communities in BC. Researchers interviewing 2,614 status and non-status First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in 11 cities across Canada between March and October 2009 found that only three in 10 first-generation urban aboriginal people have returned to their home communities since moving to the city (Environics Institute, 2010).

Urbanisation and increasing population mobility pose formidable challenges for governance and planning within the Tlowitsis Nation. A significant proportion of the rapidly rising urban population is highly mobile between and within the cities and towns they now live. This frustrates communication between Tlowitsis governing bodies and

the membership, which has in turn fomented distrust, hostility and apathy towards participation in the affairs of the Nation among dispersed community members. As a consequence of this diaspora, the Nation faces a set of unique challenges for re-establishing a cohesive community. The placement of reserves in isolation from one another and critical infrastructure networks preclude opportunities for the reconstruction of physical home community.

Reclaiming Tlowitsis

Tlowitsis Nation leadership has identified the acquisition and development of community lands as a fundamental priority in re-establishing a viable and coherent community. To achieve these goals Tlowitsis is pursuing land claims negotiations in order to reclaim control over a portion of their ancestral homeland and achieve some level of self-determination.

Land claims

Modern-day land claims in British Columbia are premised on the doctrine of Aboriginal title. The doctrine holds that “aboriginal title is a legal right derived from indigenous people’s historic occupation of their tribal lands” as affirmed in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (Menzies, 1994: 778). Because its indigenous inhabitants never ceded the majority of the province, there exists a unique legal context for Aboriginal rights and title in British Columbia stemming from the lack of treaties between BC First Nations and the federal government. Despite being physically displaced from their ancestral lands, Aboriginal nations still retain distinct legal rights to territories expropriated and alienated during the process of settler expansion (Harris, 2002). Today, First Nations across the province are asserting their rights to un-ceded territories and self-government within the framework of a six-stage process of land claims negotiations referred to as the BC treaty process facilitated by the British Columbia Treaty Commission (BCTC). Of the 198 First Nations in British Columbia, there are currently 60 First Nations participating in treaty negotiations (BCTC, 2010).

BC Treaty Commission

The release of the Report of the BC Claims Task Force in 1991 serves as the precursor to modern day treaty negotiations in British Columbia (BCTC 1991). Released during a period of political unrest, blockades and public protests from Aboriginal groups in BC, the report called specifically for the establishment of the BC Treaty Commission to provide for a more expedient process of addressing land claims outside of the court system. The process is designed to facilitate negotiations between First Nations, the provincial government of British Columbia and the federal government of Canada. These negotiations occur within a six-stage process:

Stage 1: Statement of Intent to Negotiate

First Nations desiring to participate in treaty negotiations must submit a statement of intent to the BCTC. The statement of intent defines the Nation and its membership.

Stage 2: Readiness to negotiate

During this stage FN, BC and Canada meet to confirm their collective preparedness to negotiate.

Stage 3: Negotiation of a Framework Agreement

Stage 3 defines the issues and objectives of negotiations, as well as a timetable and the procedural arrangement for the negotiation process.

Stage 4: Agreement in Principal

Substantive negotiations on each chapter of the treaty occur during this stage. Specific rights and obligations related to territories and resources, governance, dispute resolution and fiscal relations are thoroughly discussed and defined.

Stage 5: Negotiation to finalise a treaty

This stage involves the formalisation of the terms of the treaty negotiated during stage 4. More importantly, as will be discussed below, this stage requires a vote by the community to ratify the terms of the treaty.

Stage 6: Implementation

Previously negotiated plans to implement the treaty are put into effect and phased in as agreed. To date, only two agreements have been implemented.

Flowitsis participation in land claims negotiations

For Flowitsis Nation, the land rights issue is of symbolic as well as material value for this geographically dispersed First Nation whose Aboriginal title was neither recognised nor extinguished by compensation (Blackburn 2009; Woolford 2004). Since 2006, the Flowitsis Nation homeland (as place) has become the central focus of treaty negotiations. The restitution of lands and the pursuit of an increased degree of self-governance are the key objectives of the Nation's participation in the treaty process.

The Flowitsis Nation first entered land claims negotiations in 1993 as a member of the Kwakiutl Laich-Kwil-Tach Nations Treaty Society (KLNTS), a regional collective of First Nations negotiating collaboratively. The KLNTS separated into Hamatla Treaty Society (HTS) and other groups in 1997. Flowitsis continued to negotiate as a member of HTS until 2005, when Flowitsis withdrew from the group to pursue negotiations independently "due to the slow progress of treaty negotiations as part of the collective" (Flowitsis Chief Negotiator, September 2009). In 2006, Flowitsis re-entered the treaty process, submitting a revised statement of intent in June of that year. The Nation is currently engaged in substantive negotiations and stands at Stage 4, with an anticipated Agreement in Principle (AIP) during 2010. Within the context of treaty negotiations, place has become both an object of struggle and a catalyst for community mobilisation.

Community participation is integral for achieving an agreement. Communities must support the terms of treaty and its substantive claims concerning territories and resources, land and resource management plans, self-governance structures and the determination of laws and policies (BCTC, 1991). This is determined at Stage 5 of the process, which requires communities to accept or reject the negotiated terms of the treaty through a ratification vote. This essentially means that First Nations and their negotiators need to effectively engage their community in substantive and ongoing discussions to ensure that members understand and are prepared to endorse the agreement. Community engagement work is particularly challenging for Flowitsis, as it lacks a physical community to convene its members in order to inform and involve them in the ongoing negotiation dialogue. The complex challenge of community engagement

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is being addressed through a series of projects designed to enhance the involvement of the membership in the affairs of the Nation.

The experience of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation provides a comparative case for illustrating the critical importance of community participation in the treaty process. In 1993, the Lheidli T'enneh Band entered the treaty process pursuing a comprehensive land claim near Prince George, BC. Chief negotiators reached an agreement-in-principle in 2006 with a land package consisting of nearly 4,330 hectares (Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation). When in 2007 it came time to vote within the community, the agreement was defeated by the membership by a count of 123-111. Interviews with Lheidli T'enneh members following their rejection of the terms of the treaty revealed that a number of members felt they had not been adequately consulted, while others pointed to social cleavages and deep-seeded factionalism within the community as factors contributing to their rejection of the proposed treaty. The outcome of this failed process was a \$6 million treaty debt for a First Nations community with 320 members.

Once Tlowitsis re-entered the negotiation process on its own, the Nation's governing bodies recognised the overwhelming need to engage and involve its predominantly urban membership in treaty-related decision-making, governance and planning. Since 2006, the Tlowitsis Nation has partnered with University of British Columbia Okanagan through a series of projects designed to enhance levels of community engagement and participation in the affairs of the Nation, revitalise an interest in language and culture, and develop consensus on issues concerning lands and resources. The role of UBC researchers has been to work directly with community members to develop learning materials, to provide technical support (for example video editing software, equipment and staff), as well as to work together with community members to reflect on their roles both as Tlowitsis Nation members as well as their contribution to the re-membering of their community.

Tlowitsis Citizens Advisory Group and the Elders Engagement Strategy

In 2008, efforts to address the issue of community engagement resulted in the formation of the Tlowitsis Citizens Advisory Group (TCAG). The TCAG is a group of Tlowitsis citizens convened to support decision-making activities that stem from the Nation's participation in treaty negotiations. The group is comprised of 11 Tlowitsis members who reflect the diversity of the Nation in terms of age, gender, family affiliations and regional dispersal. This group was developed in response to calls from the community to participate more closely in treaty-related governance. In addition to providing advice and insight in land and resource decision-making to support treaty negotiations and consultation processes, the TCAG has also played a lead role in various community engagement activities. The group has organised and facilitated Tlowitsis Gatherings and regional meetings. They have acted as community outreach liaisons and participated at treaty negotiations. These projects are calling increased attention to the significance of ancestral lands for members of this displaced Nation as part of the drive for self-determination.

A critical component of treaty negotiations and long-term community planning requires the design and development of a governance framework. The TCAG determined that the engagement of the elders' historical and cultural knowledge, values and aspirations for the future were critical to this process. This led to the development and

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implementation of the Elders Engagement Strategy (EES). The EES involved identifying and working with community elders to support the development of a Nation-level governance framework in collaboration with TCAG members. Eight elders became involved in the project. They came from Vancouver, Campbell River, Port Hardy and Alert Bay. This group is still active and meets twice a year at the time of writing this article (June 2011). The TCAG collectively identified community elders they wished to interview. After receiving training in interview methodology and selecting knowledge-holders to engage, TCAG members conducted a series of video-recorded interviews in Alert Bay, Campbell River, Port Hardy and Vancouver. A specific objective of this project was to engage with elders' memory of the hereditary governance system that existed at Karlukwees prior to the diaspora of the community in the early 1970s, as well as their visions for the future governance of the Nation. Although time spent at the village varied among individual elders, each held strong memories of the island as a childhood home and as the last location that the Tlowitsis Nation occupied as a cohesive, physically close community. The next section describes some of the research findings that emerged through the elders' video project.

Discussion and conclusions

The obstacles to reclaiming the Nation are multifaceted. They are manifest through multi-generational dislocation and further exacerbated through the physical difficulties required to return to remote Turnour Island. It is the island location that now makes a homecoming, even for brief periods, virtually impossible, and thus severely impacts the abilities for the Nation to coalesce around their shared sense of place. As a result, the island-type location has formed an almost mystical quality for the Tlowitsis community members; a place that is so important in their history and identity, but one embodied in memory and not through the physical involvement and empirical knowledge experienced on the island.

Memory is increasingly called on to support subaltern groups struggles to re-establish identity, culture, and language, and, above all, re-appropriate historically expropriated territories and contemporarily contested places (Said, 2000). This is particularly true for Tlowitsis Nation whose claims to lands and pursuit of self-governance are necessarily based on memories of place. As outlined in the preceding section, participation in treaty has compelled the Tlowitsis Nation to engage the collective memory of community elders. Engaging idealised memories of place is a complex process that can serve to simultaneously unify or divide factions within the community, as idealised memories of Karlukwees are transformed into the governance principles for the future. What social groups choose to remember and, perhaps more importantly, choose not to remember, is a conscious effort with material and political consequences (Fentress and Wickham, 1992; Hoelscher, 2003; Said, 2000).

Idealisation of the Island

The idealisation of an ancestral home is a critical feature of diaspora (Cohen, 2008; Safran, 1991). For the Tlowitsis elders, and subsequently other community members, this idealised place is Karlukwees. Yet, the contemporary narrative of this place is a painful one for many, and discussion of its history and present condition of decay evoke

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strong emotions of frustration, sadness and despair. As one Tlowitsis member put it during a community meeting in 2006:

It's kind of hard to say where I come from because I don't come from anywhere. To say that, being First Nations is important, but to say that I'm Tlowitsis doesn't really have any significance for my family ... I went there as a child - but for me to pass anything on to my children, it's really hard to explain to them where our extended family came from because there's nothing, there's no land, there's nothing to go to. (Tlowitsis Nation member, p.c June 2006)

However, as the Elders Engagement Strategy revealed, Karlukwees is also highly revered by elders today and is seen to have embodied the ideal Tlowitsis community. The village and island lifestyle provided a healthy, safe and stable place to live and raise a family. This sense of goodness is reinforced the remoteness of Turnour Island. As one elder recalled:

It was such a beautiful little village. We had everything we needed. The forest was our grocery store, the ocean was our deep freeze. (Tlowitsis Nation elder, p.c December 2009)

Stewardship of the land, sea and air were and continue to be seen by elders as a fundamental priority. People knew what to expect from their environment and were well connected to their lands and resources through locally developed ecological knowledge and sustainable harvesting techniques. Community leaders (hereditary chiefs and core families) were responsible for and responsive to the well being of their people and their homeland. The decisions they took reflected these responsibilities.

Elders also consistently reflected upon the high level of social cohesion that existed on the island. Karlukwees is remembered as a place where “everybody got along. If there was a job to do, people helped out” (Tlowitsis Nation elder, April 2009). “There wasn't a lot of fighting in the community; not like there is today” (Tlowitsis Nation elder, April 2009). There was a strong connection to culture because of relationships between elders and youth. The community was unified and ties between members and their families were strong:

In the village, it took the whole community to raise a child, and that's the way we lived. Everybody looked after everybody's children. We were a very happy and healthy community...it was like growing up with your family. We were taught at an early age who you came from and who you're relations were. You're neighbours were your family. That's what we're trying to get back to. (Tlowitsis Nation Chief, p.c March 2010)

At Karlukwees, Tlowitsis were attached strongly to their land, had a cohesive community, and enjoyed a good quality of life. It was agreed by the TCAG that the ideals of the village contained in the memories of the elders should be incorporated into a framework for the future governance of the Nation. Based on the perspectives shared during these interviews, a list of core Tlowitsis governance principles were generated and transformed into a nation-level governance framework.

Developing a governance framework

Governance is a central component of treaty negotiations. According to the Assembly of First Nations, governance is “the process of government decision-making and law making: it presumes jurisdiction or sovereignty” (AFN, 2005: 4). Good governance is concerned with processes and outcomes and the creation of conditions for ordered rule and collective action (Graham and Wilson, 2004). Aboriginal nations continue the struggle for recognition and accommodation of their governance institutions today. This struggle is global and is crucial for mitigating diaspora, identity crisis and internal breakdown due to factors such as land loss and degradation, poverty, cultural, geographical and social disconnect (AFN, 2005). The BTC negotiations process requires that First Nations develop a nation-level governance framework that outlines the Nation’s post-treaty model for self-government. The first stage of this process requires that negotiators document the values, principles and governance structures that the community desires to incorporate into the design of a framework for self-governance.

Transforming ideals of the village into the political realm

Treaty creates impetus to engage community members and their values and principles, and to see these incorporated into a future governance framework. This requires engaging the membership in substantive discussions about their knowledge of the past and their vision for the future governance of the Nation. For Tlowitsis, this involved engaging the collective community memory of Karlukwees and the governance system that existed there. This process exposed the complex relationship between the idealised homeland and the political context of treaty.

The logistical challenges of accessing and documenting elders’ perspectives were considerable and related directly to the barriers of population dispersal. Those with knowledge of the Nation’s cultural history and territories are today dispersed throughout western Canada. Community-identified elders were known to the members of the TCAG and, in many cases, related through kinship. However, some elders involved in the project had lost contact with the Nation and their families since relocating to the city. Contact information was, in some cases, partial, outdated, or non-existent. Significant preparation, time and resources (human and financial) were required to coordinate meetings and travel arrangements for those who were identified by the TCAG and who were willing to participate. It must be noted that once contact was established, all elders were eager to participate and in many cases graciously willing to conduct the interviews at their own homes. This was critical for mitigating the logistical barriers and to the overall success of the project.

Engaging with fractured histories

In dispersed communities, members are separated by time and space. This is particularly true for Tlowitsis, who have existed in a sustained state of diaspora since the early 1970s. Sociocultural disconnection caused by compelled dislocation from the homeland, relocation to residential schools and urbanisation has fractured the cultural memory of the Nation and Tlowitsis members now unevenly possess knowledge of their cultural history and traditions.

Memory is a social activity that must be externalised for its reproduction (Hoelscher, 2003). The EES provided an opportunity to socially reproduce memory through video-recorded interviews about elders' recollections of life in the village and the ideals of the governance system that existed there. However, the process of engaging these memories proved difficult in some cases, according to the reflections of TCAG members. Although interviews intended to facilitate relaxed conversations directed by general discussion topics tailored to each participant, it was perceived that the formality of the interview resulted in reluctance among some interviewees to share information that community interviewers perceived them to possess. As one TCAG member observed, "we never talk about things like that, you know, in an interview setting" (TCAG member, April 2009). Others noted that they felt that the process itself put pressure on elders to "perform" (TCAG member, April 2009). This was attributed to the fact that, for many elders, this was their first chance to participate in substantive discussions related to treaty and to provide their insight as community knowledge-holders. There is evidence the interview put pressure on elders to produce what they perceived to be "useful" information, as one respondent did comment following his session that he hoped his interview had provided some "good stuff [for the interviewers] to use" (Tlowitsis Nation elder, April 2009). Despite the challenges and limitations of the process, follow-up discussions with participants suggested that the experience was a resoundingly positive, and much needed, opportunity to reconnect with younger generations and to have their perspectives heard.

Whose knowledge counts? The tensions of reproducing the idealised narrative

The ideals of the community and the hereditary governance system are deeply embedded within memories of Karlukwees. The project revealed that memories of the village are inherently tied to claims over what constitutes accurate representations of the past. It is therefore critical to define who is entitled to make those claims:

It's important that you define just what is meant by an elder. The term gets thrown around so much today without much thought...An elder isn't just someone who accumulated age. They were knowledgeable and recognised by the community as being an elder. (Tlowitsis Nation elder, p.c March 2010)

This statement draws attention to the complexities of engaging the collective memory of a dispersed community. The reality facing Tlowitsis is that diaspora has resulted in an urban dispersed population that is disconnected from their cultural history and each other. Elder generations are now looked to for guidance and advice based on their knowledge and past experiences. However, the information they provide is becoming politicised in the context of treaty, as idealised memories of Karlukwees are structuring the governance framework required by treaty. This leads to questions among the community about who should, and perhaps more importantly should not, be entitled to participate in the development of that vision. It also suggests that the reproduction of incorrect or partially correct understandings of the past is problematic and may serve to empower the views of an overly vocal minority.

This desire to ensure that only accurate sources contribute to the visioning of a shared future coincides with the constraints of treaty negotiations. The pace of treaty requires

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Tlowitsis to engage its members on a schedule set by negotiations, not necessarily by the needs of the community. Limited resources reduce the capacity for Tlowitsis governing bodies to access the community memory-bank as much as is desired. While strides have been made in terms of reconnecting with previously disconnected knowledge holders, it is inevitable that some members with information to share remain disengaged from the process by dint of the geographic dispersion of the Nation and feelings of poor representation. As the Nation increasingly relies on digital video as a tool for documenting and disseminating the views of community knowledge-holders to its membership, the risk that accounts of history could inspire conflict are increased. The strategic potential of the idealised narrative

Despite these tensions, it appears that the reproduction of these idealised narratives of the homeland is contributing positively to the Nation's development in specific ways. Reflections of the TCAG reveal that elders' stories of the village have become powerful motivation for achieving a level of community functionality that is remembered by elders to have existed prior to the dispersal of the community:

I've never been to Karlukwees, I've only seen pictures, but hearing the elders' stories about how great that place was, how strong the community was, it reminds me why I'm involved. It makes me think about how our community could be one day. (TCAG member, p.c May 2010)

This serves as evidence that the idealised vision of Karlukwees articulated by the elders is interpreted by members of the TCAG as guidance for how the community should strive to be in the future. At a time of increasing uncertainty, apathy and, at times, hostility and inter-familial factionalism, stories of the village shared by elders during the Elders Engagement Strategy provided a link to a place remembered, not for the conditions which preceded diaspora, but for social cohesion, a sense of community and uncomplicated belonging at a safe, secure and supportive village.

Said (2000: 185) writes that success or failure of collective memory as a political tool depends upon the ability of social groups to project a "convincing narrative story with a beginning, a middle, and end." It appears that Tlowitsis recent use of digital media to repackage the idealised narrative of Karlukwees as a political strategy is attempting to accomplish this goal. As opposed to problematic recollections of community history, idealised narratives of home are becoming viable political tools for calling attention to the unique challenges facing the community, while demonstrating that the Nation still exists but has changed. This is being achieved through digital video products that craft the case for government, funders and outsiders that Nation was functional until a short time ago. As the Tlowitsis Chief Negotiator explains:

The basic message is this: you nearly broke us, but we survived, we continue to survive, and you are going to help us rebuild...The bottom line is that it communicates to government and others that we need to rebuild a community. (Tlowitsis Nation Chief Negotiator, p.c April 2010)

The way forward

As demonstrated through the elders' video project, the process for selecting which aspects of collective histories to reproduce is both constrained and heavily dictated by

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the pace of treaty negotiations, not necessarily the desires of the Nation. Selectively endowing idealised memories of the village with political meaning as the principles for governance runs the danger of simultaneously empowering or silencing diverse community perspectives. Internal questioning among Tlowitsis members about who is actually entitled to make claims to the Nation's past coincides with the barriers of dispersion that restrict opportunities to locate, let alone engage, community-identified knowledge holders.

At the same, idealised narratives of the homeland are also functioning to inspire younger generations of Tlowitsis members. Elders' memories of the village and the strength and unity of the community that is remembered to have existed there has become a call to action for members of the TCAG. Memories of a safe, secure and healthy community at Karlukwees have become a call to action for younger generations to achieve an improved level of community functionality, as well as guide the formation of a Tlowitsis governance framework.

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