

Godı haht'ee

John B. Zoe

Each fall our people would travel on our ancestral trails to hozii (the barrenlands) to harvest everything they needed to prepare for the winter. On one of the major trails called the Hozideè Etq K'è, on a small river lake just above the outflow of Tsik'eèmjti, there is a monumental island called Dedats'etsaa where people would leave the things they didn't need beyond the tree line.¹ From there the people would travel to hunt in hozii, collecting all the necessary materials for the coming winter: hides for clothing and drymeat to carry them through freeze up.

On their return to Dedats'etsaa, the people would retrieve everything they left behind, and everyone would come together again. As the lakes and rivers froze, they spent time working on equipment and tools and building sleds for winter. When everyone was together, it was also a good time to tell stories.

There was a time when the animals and the people intermingled with one another. Satsògaà, upon seeing an encampment with many campfires from above, landed high up on a tree. Looking around, he saw Nòhtà (Grebe) and Kwoh (Merganser) walking towards their tent. He could see that the two birds had long beautiful hair, and he began to think about how he could convince them to cut it. From his perch he coasted down to the ground and turned into a man. Then he walked into the camp. The residents greeted him and followed him as he made his way to where Nòhtà and Kwoh shared a tipi. Both people and animals followed him because they were excited to hear his stories and news from his travels.

Nòhtà and Kwoh greeted Satsògaà and invited him in to sit next to them. The older ones crowded around the hearth, while younger aggressive ones poked their heads in at the entrance. Others spread around the outside of the kònihba (caribou hide tipi), leaning in with their ears to hear better. Nòhtà and Kwoh fed their guest. When Satsògaà finished, they introduced him as the one who travels and sees everything and has many stories to tell. Satsògaà used his hands and arms and body movements when he told stories, so he sat with space between him and everyone else so the community could see him clearly. Goxè hodı k'e nìtla (he started telling a story). Satsògaà talked about the outside world, what he had seen and heard, and shared news from relatives far away.

Once he had the camp totally fixated on his every word and movement, Satsògaà turned to Nòhtà and Kwoh. Looking directly at his hosts, he said, "Hə?ə nq. Yes, I have seen and travelled to many different places. Some godı (news) are good and some are not. I had heard that the people of Nòhtà and Kwoh, gık'e hodeh." His two

¹ Dedats'etsaa is the name and logo for the Tłıchq Research and Training Institute, "the island where our people stored something for the way back for retrieval for continued use" (Zoe 2013).

hosts looked at him in disbelief. They cried out loudly, sending shock waves through the audience. In shock, Nòhtà and Kwoh began to grieve, and the audience grieved with them as Satsògaà sat looking on.

Nòhtà and Kwoh grieved uncontrollably. The audience finally started to murmur. Someone said, “There’s a point when gots’eèdii (grief) can go so deep that it leaves you in a state of no return.” Hearing that, the two inconsolable hosts were frightened. They asked Satsògaà if he had ever observed something like this in his travels and what the remedy was, if any. Satsògaà, looking at the two birds, said, “Yes, I have seen this in my travels, and the remedy is to have your hair cut, which will relieve your grief. If Nòhtà and Kwoh agree, I can cut their hair.” The two birds, still deep in grief and unable to say anything, nodded in agreement.

Satsògaà grabbed the base of Nòhtà’s long hair, took out his stone knife, and sliced down. That’s why to this day when you look at Nòhtà from the side you can see Satsògaà’s cut. He then grabbed Kwoh’s long hair at the base. As he sliced through the hair with his knife, he blurted out that what he said about the people of Nòhtà and Kwoh was not true. Upon hearing Satsògaà’s admission, Kwoh pulled his head forward, and that is why when you look at Kwoh from the side, it looks like he has an unfinished haircut with sparse, long, and thin hairs trailing down the back of his head.



*Caribou skin tipi at Elizabeth Mackenzie Elementary School and a Raven.
Photos by Cody Steven Mantla (@codystevenmantla on Instagram).*

The audience was furious. All at once everyone lunged towards Satsògaà. He casually leapt just out of reach of the angry audience, spread his wings, and flew out of the mòwà (the opening of the tipi) between the poles crying, “CAW, CAW!”

The story of Nòhtà and Kwoh is an old story, a story from the time when the animals and people could change places. Colonization has tried to erase the past, our past, and create futures using the knowledges and methods of the colonizer. But there is another way. We can retrieve those things that are ours – our land, language, culture, way of life – and move into the future guided by our own stories and practices.

In our traditional territories, there are many godı haıht'ee (listeners that absorb the stories). When a godı haıht'ee is present, the story flows much better. The storyteller knows there is someone there who is really listening and who will make sure the stories and storytelling will continue on into the future. Godı haıht'ee also attract goxèhodıı (storytellers) because they are the scribes who keep the information, like an enıht'è (book).

Dè goızi (place names) are the bookmarks, a reminder of events told and retold by storytellers, past and present. Goxèhodıı are energized by dè goızi and share more in these places. Some stories are old; they tell of a time of giant animals. These places are revered; silence is important when passing them to not awaken the dormant entities there. An offering left in the direction of the place helps to appease the Woyèedi.

Our goxèhodıı are fading now and reaching less of an audience. The further we step away from our original journaling and the descriptions of our original authors, as told by goxèhodıı and absorbed by godı haıht'ee, the less we know of ourselves and the more we begin to believe the narrative that our own ways of teaching, learning, and remembering are not sustainable in this day and age.

Here in the North, we're hoping to have our own polytechnic university. But we don't want to go into it the way we went to residential or public schools. We want to go in there as we are, bringing our whole selves with us. The idea isn't to leave some parts behind and make space for it later. We want to build in our ways of being, knowing, and doing from the beginning. The people who left what they needed at Dedats'etsaa would always return to retrieve those things. It's possible even now to make sure we take those things with us. When you're going into the school, into the university, it's like coming from the source of hozıı. We don't have to choose between godı haıht'ee and the southern university. We can take everything with us, as whole people.

The same is true in this journal. We have worked together in the spirit and intent of the treaties. We come together as whole people, bringing all of our knowledges with us. The stories that appear here have been submitted by a variety of people from across the North, about who they are, who they were, who they understand themselves to be. These are people who have learned in the old ways or in institutions or maybe both, and now they are bringing their stories to the public.

John B. Zoe was the Chief Land Claims Negotiator for the former Treaty 11 Council of the NWT from 1992 until its conclusion with the establishment of the Tłıchq Government in 2005. Dedicated to preserving, reviving, and celebrating the culture and language of the Tłıchq people, he helped revitalize canoeing with Elders to strengthen youth to follow the traditional Trails of our Ancestors. John is an advisor to the Tłıchq Government, Chair of Dedat'seetsaa: the Tłıchq Research and Training Institute, and Chair of the Governing Council for Hotıı ts'eeda.

REFERENCES

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