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Aboriginal values and resource development in Native Space: Lessons from British Columbia



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ABSTRACT

In British Columbia, Canada, resource development takes place within the traditional territories of Aboriginal people, often without signed treaties or agreements. This frequently sparks opposition from local Indigenous communities, even in locations where economic benefits are promised in exchange for access to land. This paper casts light on this subject through a case study of resistance among the Tsilhqot'in Indigenous people, who are protesting against the development of a multi-million dollar gold-copper mine within their traditional territory. Drawing on findings from Community-Based research and a review of documents from Tsilhqot'in court cases, this paper provides a deepened understanding about the relationship the Tsilhqot'in people have with their land. The major themes covered are as follows: (1) Aboriginal community values, which are critical to the survival of such people; and (2) the contemporary culture of the Tsilhqot'in people, including profiling how some women continue to survive on the land. The study captures the dynamics of Aboriginal values at the project location and how these are affected by resource development activities.

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1. Introduction

For millennia, Canada's Indigenous populations have sustained themselves on the land through traditional and subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, and the gathering of foods and medicinal plants. The land, which is a geographic, social, and historical space used by the people, is commonly known as their traditional territory. This space had been the subject of the Native land question throughout the history of British Columbia (BC) in particular. The areas within which the country's Indigenous groups have traditionally sustained themselves has been termed 'Native Space' (Brooks, 2004; Harris, 2002; and Morris and Fondahl, 2002). There are several studies which explore the engagement of Aboriginal¹ communities and resource development within Native Space in Canada (e.g. Anderson et al., 2006; Dana et al., 2008; Gibson and Klinck, 2005; Hipwell et al., 2002; Keeling and Sandlos, 2009). While some communities have welcomed development, others have resisted it within their space.

This paper details a case of the latter, exploring the relationship the Tsilhqot'in people have with their Native Space, and offering

explanations for why they have resisted resource development. The Tsilhqot'in people are mainly traditionalists, and their history of resisting resource development within their Native Space dates as far back as 1864 (Bhattacharyya et al., 2012). The recent proposal for a gold-copper mine project presented an opportunity to learn more about the people, their relationship with the land, and why they resist resource development. This paper captures the dynamics of the resistance of the Tsilhqot'in people within their Native Space in the Cariboo Chilcotin region of BC. Drawing on findings from Community-Based research and documents from Tsilhqot'in court cases, this paper provides insight into why these people resist resource development within their traditional territory. The major themes addressed are: (1) Aboriginal community values, which are critical to the survival of such people; and (2) the contemporary culture of the Tsilhqot'in people, including knowledge of how some women continue to survive on the land. The paper captures the details of Aboriginal values at the project location, and how these are affected by resource development.

2. Research objectives, methods, and methodology

In this study, a hybrid methodology and mixed methods were employed. It combined Indigenous ways of 'knowing' with grounded theory, as a cultural insider approach was necessary

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¹ Aboriginal people are the Indigenous people of Canada. The three broad groups of Aboriginal people are First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. In this paper, Aboriginal and Indigenous people have been used interchangeably.

within the traditional setting of the Tsilhqot'in community. This approach is more sensitive and responsive to non-verbal cues, the ability to ask more meaningful questions, and to hear and see through a different lens (Bishop, 2005).

Data collection for the study included my participation in the two federal Environmental Assessments conducted for the gold and copper mining project, one in 2010 and the other in 2013. A review of 37 transcript volumes from the 2010 Environmental Assessment (EA) of the gold and copper mine project was conducted as part of the study. Content analysis of these transcripts consists of quotes from 101 First Nations participants. The participants ranged in ages from community elders, adults, to youth. These participants were mostly Tsilhqot'in people and other Aboriginal people who used the lands in areas which were to be affected by the mining project. The Panel Hearings were taped and transcribed as part of the process, and the transcripts were made publicly available.

Data were also gathered via participant observation at two community gatherings, through 'chats' and semi-structured interviews. The Tsilhqot'in have not been the subject of much research. Most of the work conducted within the community over the past 25 years has been for the purpose of legal actions taken against the provincial government. Content and thematic analysis of extant data, which included documents and transcripts from the *Tsilhqot'in Nation vs British Columbia* court case, was used. The Tsilhqot'in were seeking declaration of an Aboriginal title and Aboriginal rights to an area of their Native Space (*Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, 2007). The case commenced in the Supreme Court of BC in 2002 as an amalgamation of other court actions against forestry activities, first started in 1989, which then led to the "Nemiah Trapline Action" of 1990 and the "Brittany Triangle Action" of 1998 (*Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, 2007). A vast amount of oral history and traditional evidence as well as a number of historical documents were presented at the trial which lasted 339 days (*Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, 2014). A review of these court case documents was conducted to develop an understanding of patterns and trends which were then affirmed by other data sources. These documents also provided information about historical and current lands and resource usage by the Tsilhqot'in people within the region.

Participant observation was employed to further understand the cultural lens of the Tsilhqot'in people because of my different indigenous background and knowledge. As a result, I attended two Tsilhqot'in community gathering events, one at Fish Lake and the other at Brittany Triangle, in the autumn of 2012. Both events were held at different locations within the Tsilhqot'in territory. The locations were sites of historical and contemporary significance to the people. Community members, including those who lived in urban areas, and guests camped at these locations for the duration of the events. At the events, I had numerous conversations with Tsilhqot'in people and listened to speeches made by various community members and leaders.

Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indigenas (2006) reported on how resource development activities on Indigenous lands affected women. It was therefore important to hear from some Tsilhqot'in women. I, therefore, interviewed five Tsilhqot'in women as part of this study. Three of the interviews were conducted at Fish Lake. The other two were conducted at the Brittany Gathering. Key questions asked at the Fish Lake Gathering were as follows:

- How do Tsilhqot'in women utilize their ancestral lands?
- How much moose, fish, berries, and medicinal plants do families require for food and for other purposes?
- How do the women preserve and use their harvests?

The answers complemented what was presented by Tsilhqot'in people at the Environmental Assessment Panel Hearings. Key questions asked at the Brittany Gathering were as follows:

- How do Tsilhqot'in people enhance their knowledge of the land?
- How do the people know what they know?

During the interviews, I took notes as the participants spoke. At the end of the interviews, these notes were reviewed with individual participants.

This study was conducted following a framework for the ethical conduct of research involving Aboriginal people, as set out by Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statements (Government of Canada, 2014). Major aspects of the framework included community engagement in the research process, and respect for the community's customs, traditions, traditional knowledge, and their governing authorities. The Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles of data involving Aboriginal communities were also applied (Schnarch, 2004). For this particular research, a significant amount of data gathered and the research outcome became public information. However, informed consent was obtained from the Tsilhqot'in National Government and the Xeni Gwet'in community prior to conducting the study. In addition, this study received approval from the university's Ethics Review Board.

For the data collection and interpretation methodology, a framework for understanding Tsilhqot'in epistemology, which was developed for a different project, was used (Kunkel, 2014, 184). This framework, present in Fig. 1, guided the data collection, the interpretation and analysis. The framework also provided a means of situating oral histories and stories within different eras, as dated by anthropologists.

Transcribed data from the EA were reduced and coded for cultural themes using QSR NVivo 9 software. To bring together the cultural themes generated, inductive elaboration was needed (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). A grounded theory approach was used throughout the data collection and analysis to generate theory (Charmaz, 2005)

Triangulation of meanings and interpretations was important in this research because of the Indigenous setting. Participation in community gatherings was equally important as it provided a setting for me to gain better understanding of the traditionalist lifestyle and worldviews of the Tsilhqot'in people. The interviews with the women and the many conversations with community members provided clarity, accuracy, interpretations, and validation for data in addition to providing more information.

3. Resource development and Aboriginal space in BC

The history of Aboriginal usage of land in BC has not been well-documented. In the early days, the settlers assumed that the

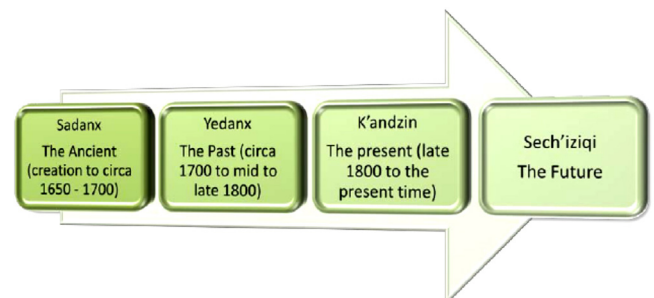


Fig. 1. Tsilhqot'in epistemology framework.

Source: Kunkel, 2014, p. 184

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