Edı̨ı̨ Gots'ǫ Gogǫ̀hłı̨

Where We Were Born

Tłı̨chǫ Birthplace Mapping Project

Dedats'eetsaa:
Tłı̨chǫ Research & Training Institute
www.research.tlicho.ca

the firelight group
www.thefirelightgroup.com

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credits

This Study was based on the traditional knowledge and stories from the following elders:

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Pictured left to right: James Rabesca, Melanie Weyallon, Dora Migwi, Monique Mackenzie, Elizabeth Rabesca, Georgina Chocolate. Photo taken by Janelle Kuntz.

content

List of Birth Related Terminology

Tłı̨chǫ	English	Meaning
Bebìa dǫelı̨ı̨	Birth	Child birth
Bebìa nìhtè		Give birth
Bebìa webòkw'ìatł'ìì	Umbilical cord	Umbilical cord
Bebìa gots'ǫ	Pregnancy	Be pregnant; have a baby
Hotıts'eeda-le		Pregnancy
Cheekotì	Placenta	Amniotic fluid / after birth
Eketł'aèzaa / eketł'aèzhaa		After birth
Chekoa t'òeht'òo	Breastfeeding	A child is breastfeeding
Chekoa t'òeht'ò ayehʔı̨		Third person singular: she is breastfeeding the child
Chekoa t'òò k'e whehda		She has the baby on the breast
Chekoa t'òò k'e wheda		The child is breastfeeding, or the child is on the breast
Got'òò		Breast; milk
T'òò		Breast milk
Kw'ah	Moss / moss bag	Moss / diaper moss
Kw'ahwò		Diaper-moss bag
Kw'ahk'ìì		Moss diaper
Ts'èko wetł'aà chekoa dǫ elı̨ı̨	Midwife	A woman delivers a child

Sources: Mary Siemens; Georgina Chocolate; Tlicho Yatıì Multimedia Dictionary.

Placenames

Tłı̨chǫ	English
Behchokǫ̀	Rae, Fort Rae or Rae-Edzo
Dètaı̨ htǫ	Tayonton Lake
Gots'ǫkàtì	Mesa Lake
Hǫzıì	Barrenland
Įhdaak'è Tì	Marian Lake
K'eàgotì	Hislop Lake
Kwèdıɪʔèè	Riviere Grandin
Sahtì	Great Bear Lake

Sources: Mary Siemens; Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute (2014); Tlicho Yatıì Multimedia Dictionary.

So when a child was birthing the women were like real doctors for each other … One woman would press against her back 'like this' and another woman would be hugging her, holding her up. In that way the mother was kneeling down while the women urged her to push down hard and to stay that way until the baby came out. They encouraged her to try to help herself by pushing down, telling her the baby will come that way. That was how our people helped each other living in the bush.

- Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd 2016

Source: Library and Archives Canada.

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tłı̨chǫ knowledge and identity is rooted in understanding the *dè* (the land), and through experiences on the land. As Legat (2012:18) describes, "to know is to maintain proper, respectful relationships with all that is part of the *dè*." Travelling through and experiencing the *dè* is central to the Tłı̨chǫ ways of knowing. While most research with Tłı̨chǫ tends to focus on the ecological aspects of Tłı̨chǫ knowledge systems, this report focuses on knowledge associated with childbirth, and aspects of midwifery practiced in Tłı̨chǫ families over time. The stories shared in this report explore the meaning of being born on the *dè* and the associated knowledge, and allows for a deeper understanding of what it means to come from the *dè*.

Historically, Tłı̨chǫ women gave birth on the land wherever they were traveling at the time. Giving birth on the land required an intimate knowledge of women's health, plants, medicines and the environment for both the baby and mother's survival. In the past, Tłı̨chǫ midwives were often relied upon to help deliver babies and care for the mother's during childbirth. While it was common to rely on midwives and other women in the community, there were many occasions when only a woman's husband or male relatives were present to help deliver the baby. It was therefore considered crucial that both Tłı̨chǫ women and men had knowledge about childbirth in order to safely deliver a baby and to survive on the land.

Birthplaces have the potential to anchor an individual to a particular place (Olson 2013; Trudelle-Schwarz 1996). The elders we spoke to described birthplaces as an important for both the mother and the baby, which connect them directly to the land and these specific areas. In this way, the relational aspects of places on the landscape becomes clear, in that the direct connection of place and Tłı̨chǫ is made explicit through childbirth in particular places. Although many Tłı̨chǫ women today give birth in urban medical centers, Tłı̨chǫ elders who participated in this project feel it is important for younger generations to have this knowledge.

This report explores the importance of birthplaces through an ethno historical mapping project. The impetus for this project came from discussions between Tłı̨chǫ Government staff, elders and the report authors regarding the importance of mapping places of birth on the land. This report highlights four elder's stories about birthplaces and childbirth practices. The elder's mapped birthplaces spanning across Tłı̨chǫ territory. These places and the elder's stories illuminate the importance of learning about birthplaces and listening to their words so that younger generations may carry on the Tłı̨chǫ way of life.

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

On February 2nd and 3rd of 2016, four women elders gathered in the Tłı̨chǫ Government Culture and Lands Protection boardroom in Behchokǫ̀ to share their stories about birthplaces and birthing practices on the land. All four of the elders had experienced either giving birth on the land or being present at a birth on the land. Some of the elder's stories shared in this report were previously recorded.

The two days were arranged as a semi-structured focus group. Questions were kept to a minimum so that the elders could elaborate and share the stories that were important to them. Allowing for the elders to share their stories in this way yielded more insightful and personal answers, rather than interrupting with a series of questions (Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute 2016:14). It also allowed the elders to share a broad range of views on the same topic (Hennink 2014). Each elder took their turn speaking, moving in a circle to that everyone had an opportunity to tell their story.

In addition to recording their stories, the elder's mapped a total of 11 birthplace sites on Google Earth using direct-to-digital mapping techniques (DeRoy 2014). Birthplace sites were recorded with points geo-referenced at a scale of 1:50,000 or finer. Each point represents an approximate location of a birthplace that an elder spoke of in their stories.

The elder's stories were recorded in Tłı̨chǫ on handheld audio recorders. These recordings were transcribed into English by Mary Siemens. Georgina Chocolate, the community researcher, facilitated the focus group and took notes. James Rabesca provided translations during the focus groups. Report authors Rachel Olson and Janelle Kuntz also attended the focus groups and recorded the mapped sites in Google Earth.

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Maps

Many traditional knowledge studies today involve mapping elders land use activities. While some of the elders had participated in mapping projects before, they had not had the opportunity to specifically focus on mapping birthplaces. Mapping can help visualize complex land use practices (Olson and Chocolate 2012), such as childbirth. In this regard, mapping was used as a strategic method for linking the elder's stories and oral narratives to the landscape.

It is important to note that this map represents only the reported birthplace locations of the four elders who participated in the project. It is not meant to represent Tłı̨chǫ people's broader use and knowledge of the landscape. Any absence of mapped data does not indicate the absence of knowledge or use of the area.

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

The elders mapped a total of 11 birthplaces spanning across Tłı̨chǫ country. This includes places where the elders were born and places where their family members were born. Birthplace sites were recorded at Behchokǫ̀ (Rae), K'eàgotì (Hislop Lake), Įhdaak'è Tì (Marian Lake), Dètaı̨ htǫ (Tayonton Lake), Gots'ǫkàtì (Mesa Lake), Kwèdıı̨ǝè (Riviere Grandin) and Sahtì (Great Bear Lake).

It is important to note that for Tłı̨chǫ people, places names are "indicators of bio-geographical knowledge" (Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute 2014:20). They are rich in cultural and ecological information, pointing to where resources are available. Thomas Andrews (2011:34) affirms that place names are often relational to "the rules and moral codes of society, history and mythology, worldview, kinship, relationships with neighboring

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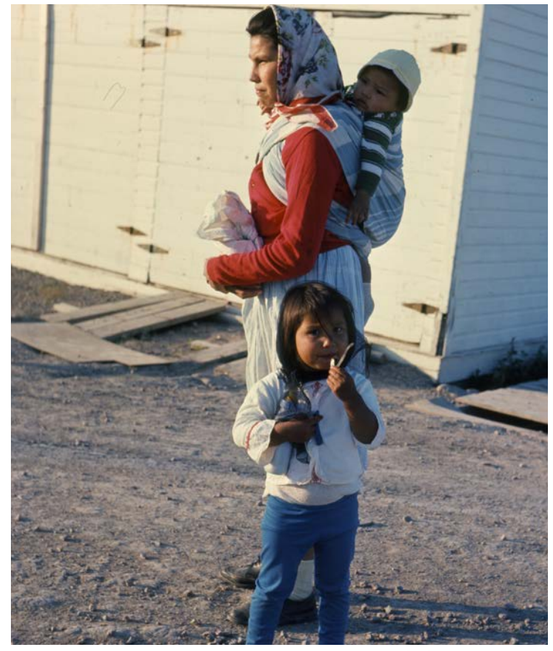
Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.



Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

groups, relations with other-than-human persons, resources and their distribution, and other aspect of society, culture and environment." Place names are passed down from the ancestors through oral tradition, which "contains complete knowledge" (Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute 2014:55). To this effect, place names were noted and utilized within the mapping process.

3.2 Childbirth

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

Childbirth on the *dè* required intimate knowledge of pregnancy, and the stages of childbirth, including how to recognize risks and complications, and postpartum care for mothers and newborns. As stated above, basic knowledge of childbirth was often common knowledge, and a necessity for Tłı̨chǫ families travelling on the land. When complications would arise, Tłı̨chǫ midwives and/or medicine men were often called to assist with a delivery. Marie Zoe, Melanie Washie, Gowa, Madı̨, and Monıgoa were some of the community midwives named by the elders in their stories.

The elders who participated in this project described several important aspects of childbirth in their stories. This included:

- Preparing for birth
- Afterbirth
- Breastfeeding
- Moss, and
- Travel and childbirth

Several of the elders referred to women as "doctors" on the land. Women were considered essential for supporting one another during the birth. Melanie Weyallon told a story about several Tłı̨chǫ midwives who helped many women deliver their babies, including her sister Adele:

> *In February my sister Adele went into labor. Goòwa Jıbì's mother was also a midwife there and Tsèye's wife who didn't have children was also a midwife. There was also Madı̨ the old wife of Mantla; her mother and my older sister Josephine were also midwives. So there were four midwives in the camp. Nıgolàa was delivered by them on the land there. After he was born, my sister became strong again. (Melanie Weyallon, February 2nd, 2016).*

The elders explained that it was common for them to attend others' births. Childbirth often involved the work of several women working together to help deliver the baby safely. Hot ashes would be placed underneath spruce boughs covered with caribou hide, which the mother and baby would lay on. The mother was given spruce medicine to help with the pain. They would then put the baby into a hide and moss bag (like a diaper). Caring for one another was crucial to the health and survival of the mother and child.

> *It is true that our people used to take care of each other well. They performed like doctors for each other when they delivered their babies in the cold and when they did not have enough things to work with: no medicines or supplies. They took good care of each other and they were also careful about blood and bodily fluids. That is how the people worked together on the land as they have often said for themselves. When a woman has her baby she is in terrible pain so she is given a herbal drink to ease her pain and to help her get well. That was how they cared for each other. (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*

Families often depended on each other and other Tłı̨chǫ members to help safely deliver a child. Elizabeth Rabesca and Monique Mackenzie shared their stories about witnessing childbirth:

> *I witnessed two child births. I was the one strongly holding up the mother and I witnessed a baby being born. That was Madǫ̀ǫ̀cho's first wife. There were poles above in the tent which were tied together 'like this' and over 'like this'. They would hold the woman 'like this'. Romie's wife and Yabè took turns with each other over and over. She was heavy but I held her 'like this'. She was very heavy but I managed not to let go of her. Finally, I asked my friend Mǫgo the wife of K'aàwıgǫą to take my place. So there were three women there to help but she was getting weak. She still kept pushing downward as hard as she could … That woman was still in labor and on the second night the baby was born by hand. They said Xàgoòyıa's mother helped her in-law by taking out the baby. (Elizabeth Rabesca, February 2nd, 2016).*
>
> *I witnessed the birth of all my mother's children. I was already my mother's helper when I was still not old enough to live out in the puberty hut. I helped her with things like making herbal medicine. When people were not well they only used herbal medicines to get well, so that is what they were making. It was really hard to work at night by the light of a candle, but the medicines saved many children from death. (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

3.3 Preparing for birth

Working together and caring for one another during childbirth was a central theme in the elder's stories. Monique Mackenzie explained that three women were often relied upon in a delivery. Together, the three women would hold onto the mother, clean the baby off and give the mother medicine.

At the time of birth, the mother would be kneeling down like this and one woman would be pressing against her back. That is the way a child was born. When the baby is being birthed the baby falls head first to the ground and a third woman takes hold of the baby; she lays it down. First, she ties the umbilical cord and then cuts it. After that, feeling with her finger she clears out the baby's mouth and then she presses against the baby's back; then the fluid comes out of its mouth. If they don't do that they say the baby will get sick from the amniotic fluid. I remember that was how people used to deliver babies.

> *Then they would clean up the baby and lay it down on the moss. If it is a boy they would say, 'A baby boy is born!' Then to the father they would say with joy, 'A baby boy has been born for you!' They would be very happy for the father that the baby was delivered well. If the mother becomes sick to her stomach they would have readymade white spruce tea to give her. After giving birth the mother was given herbal medicine to heal her womb and her scars. That was how our people carried out their lives on the land for many years. (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*

Historical records also provide a similar description of Tłı̨chǫ childbirth practices on the land:

> *Women removed to a special shelter for childbirth. They were attended by other mature women, often close relatives. The mother knelt to give birth, over a pad of moss prepared to receive the baby (Helm 1981:301).*

Georgina Chocolate also explains how Tłı̨chǫ would prepare and deliver babies:

> *Preparations for birth included setting up a bed of clean boughs with lots of moss on top for the women to sit on, as well a frame of logs was made for her to hand on to, while she knelt to deliver, women would also help her hang on so she could push, with the contractions. One elderly women sat behind the birthing women to catch the baby. This was usually a senior women and the baby; [the baby] was born on her hands.*

Source: Hudson's Bay Company Archive.

Source: NWT Archives.

In addition to delivering the baby, there was a lot of work to be done in preparation for the delivery. This included collecting plants and spruce branches and preparing a canvas bed in order for the mother to give birth comfortably. Keeping the mother and baby warm was an important part of aiding in the delivery.

> *They [midwives] would push aside the spruce branches and pour hot cinders, without the embers, onto the ground and lay a canvas down on top of it. Then they would layer on some clothing and make it comfortable and then they would lay the woman on it, all the time keeping her feet warm. That was how babies were born. (Melanie Weyallon, February 2nd, 2016).*

3.4 Placenta

Following the birth of a child, cultural protocols were followed to care for the afterbirth and umbilical cord. Placenta, or afterbirth, is known as 'chekozhı̨ı̨', which translates in English as 'child's clothing'. Some elder's reported that the afterbirth would be buried in the ground nearby. Melanie Weyallon shared a story about her uncle Ilaebè who burned his wife's afterbirth due to the fear of it attracting animals.

> *My uncle's wife had a baby. Uncle was Ilaebè's father. We met up with them at K'eàgotì (Hislop Lake) and his wife was in labour. My uncle put a lot of wood on the fire. His wife told him to burn it so my uncle burned the afterbirth. They were afraid that there might be animals around if they threw it on the land. He threw the afterbirth and the mat on which she gave birth into the fire. He burned it because his wife told him to. (Melanie Weyallon, February 3rd, 2016).*

Umbilical cords, known as bebìa webòkw'ìatł'ì, were often removed shortly after the baby was born. Most mothers would keep the umbilical cords once they were removed. In some cases, the cord was kept by the maternal grandmother until the next child was born or until the child turned one. Then the grandmother would place it high in a tree; people believed the animal or bird who ate the cord became the guardian spirit of the child.

Once the umbilical cord was removed, fine ash was used to heal the baby's stomach. Monique Mackenzie shared a story about using ash on the baby's tummy to help detach the cord from the baby.

> *In order to get the umbilical cord to heal they would rub ashes around the tummy button to help the healing process. They would check on it every so often to make sure it was healing and then they would rub more ashes on it until it fell off. When the dried umbilical cord finally came off they would rub ashes and lard on the tummy button. I guess that was used to heal the tummy button. They would keep the detached umbilical cord and they would not throw it away. I remember my mother used to do that. (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*
>
> *Once the baby arrived and the umbilical cord was cut, the baby was passed to one of the women to wipe and wrap and then the baby was put in the moss bag, meanwhile the placenta was delivered and the mother could rest. Women who had just borne baby had their own set of dishes and utensils and stayed on one side of the tent, they went out the side of the tent, to a place of their own to avoid and they were not permitted to walk around in the camp until their bleeding stopped. (Georgina Chocolate, personal communication).*

Ehtsı̨ Wexè Chekoa Gıgǫ̀hłı̨

Dakwe whaà Ehtsı̨ Tłı̨chǫ nè gogha cheko wıtł'aà gıgǫ̀hłı̨ ı̨lè. Ts'èko łǫ ts'àı̨dì hǫt'e, gıbebìa gǫ̀hłı̨ ha nıdè gots'àtła. Ihk'è gǫwàa nàgedè kò gıxàgeehɔà. Ihk'è k'omoòdǫ et'ìì gıxàehɔà hanì-le dè to whaà gıxàehɔà.

Nı̨hbàa goyaetła ts'ǫet'ìì ts'èko k'aèhta. Ts'èko łǫ goyıèhkw'e, ts'èko eyaelı̨ı̨ gha yagehtı eyıts'ǫ webebìa ı̨łaà wegǫ̀hłı̨-lee sı gha yagehtı. Ehtsı̨ hagòhdı, "Nǫ̀htsı̨ ts'ǫ̀ segha yaahtı, wet'à sınì nàtso ha eyıts'ǫ sedzeè sı nàtso ha," goèhdı tł'axǫ bebìa gǫ̀hłı̨ gha sınį̀ da.

Ihk'è ts'èko łǫ gıbebìa gǫ̀hłı̨ ha gıxè hoìla agot'į̀. Ihk'è chekoa nàwo nıdè gıkè dakwełǫ̀ǫ̀ t'à gıgǫ̀hłı̨. Hanì nıdè Ehtsı̨ edılà k'e tłeh yehchı, hanì t'a edılà t'à ts'èko wechǫ yìı k'eedı, bebìa wegǫ̀hłı̨ ha bebìa ts'àdı.

Ekıyeè k'e nàèdık'èezhǫ whìle ı̨lè. Ts'èko sìı bebìa k'è eyaelı̨ nıdè wegha dechı̨ nàı̨ɔaa gehtsı̨, ts'èko yek'e ı̨doo nàdıtǫ̀ t'à hanì webebìa gòhłè. Bebìa gǫ̀hłı̨ tł'axǫ Ehtsı̨ ı̨łè dzêahtaa ts'ǫ̀ ts'èko gà wheda, bebìa k'ègedì gha gots'àdı. Ehtsı̨ ts'èko nàtso hǫt'e ı̨lè. Wetsàa aht'e t'à mahsì wèehwhǫ.

Therese Chinkon wegodìı, nı̨htł'è Rosa Hoghàseèhtǫ Eyıts'ǫ Behchokǫ̀-Edzò Gots'ǫ Godı gots'ǫ hǫt'e.

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Communıty Servıces Agency. 2007. Tłı̨chǫ K'ę̀ę̀ Ets'eetłèe xè Enı̨tł'è K'e Yats'ehtıı: Reading and Writıng in Tłı̨chǫ Yatıı. Behchokǫ̀, NT.

Source: Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

3.5 Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding was the central way Tłı̨chǫ mothers fed their newborns and infants. If the mother's milk was not coming, Monique Mackenzie recalls both the mother and baby being given soup made from a caribou's spinal cord to substitute food and stimulate milk production. All of the elders spoke about the importance of having caribou meat in their diets to support the healthy growth of babies.

> *The mother raised their babies by breastfeeding them. If the mother had no milk coming from her breasts she was given lots of soup to drink. If the baby was still hungry because there was no milk from its mother's breast, they also fed the baby soup made from the caribou spinal cord. I remember that was how they raised children. (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*

The connection between caribou and breastfeeding is important. For Tłı̨chǫ people, caribou is a culturally significant food source. The relationships between Tłı̨chǫ peoples and the caribou is premised on respectful interactions in order to maintain "the delicate ecological balance and ensure renewal" (Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute 2016:6). Due to recent changes in caribou populations and migration patterns (ibid), some of the elders are not getting as some caribou meat as they used to. The elder's felt strongly that caribou meat is important for Tłı̨chǫ people's health, including mothers and babies. They depend and live on it. Monique Mackenzie described the importance of caribou to Tłı̨chǫ people and its impact on their health:

> *The caribou are like our souls … Caribou is the most important source of our well-being. We pray over it and we put it in our plate; we honor it like the bread of God; now they have done away with it so we have nothing to eat. That is why the people are sick with diseases. The blood of the caribou is good, the marrow is good, and all kinds of good things are in the caribou. If we don't use any of the nourishments that are found in the caribou, how can that be a good thing? (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*

Source: NWT Archives.

3.6 Moss

Tłı̨chǫ peoples relied on moss, known as kw'ah, kw'ahwò and kw'ahk'ìì, to use as diapers for their babies. It was important for moss to be thoroughly cleaned of any sticks or debris before it could be used. Once it was cleaned, the moss would be hung on a dry rack similar to the way drymeat is hung. A hide would be used to create a "moss bag" which would fashion a traditional diaper for babies and young children.

> *In those days small children were in moss diapers. They had never seen these kinds of diapers from the store. They didn't know anything about those but now they are mainly used. In the past when there was a good supply of moss they were very happy as they dug it out. They would put up crisscrossed drying racks in the tent and put moss on top of the racks. As soon as the moss were thawed on the outside they would pull it apart and dry it up on racks. They would make it look like drymeat hanging on racks. Sometimes they also dried moss under the stove. Moss was used while raising children. We didn't know about these kinds of modern diapers; children were raised only on moss. (Elizabeth Rabesca, February 3rd 2016).*

> *… in the past all of the children were raised in moss diapers; all of my younger brothers were raised in moss diapers. Mom used to put moss in a moss bag and she used it to diaper all of my younger brothers; she raised them all in that way. So moss is a really good natural thing that all our ancestors raised their children in. (Dora Migwi, February 2nd, 2016).*

Some elder's expressed their concern about the younger and future Tłı̨chǫ generations not having knowledge of these birthing practices. Dora Migwi feels that being knowledgeable in traditional practices, such as collecting moss, is important for survival.

> *Time has passed, until now in the present the young people do not know anything about that; they just buy diapers from the stores. What if hard times happen again, then what will they do? It will be back to using the moss again. In the present now, we don't know if it will always be like this in the future. If all the lights go out, how will they live then; how will they survive? (Dora Migwi February 2nd, 2016).*

Source: Library and Archives Canada.

3.7 Travel and childbirth

Tłı̨chǫ peoples travelled extensively across their territory, which meant women often gave birth where they were at the time. Monique Mackenzie described how it was not uncommon for a mother to travel the day after she gave birth so that the families could continue to live off of the land. This was particularly common if a mother delivered a baby while traveling on their seasonal rounds.

> *Life in the bush was a really hard struggle. Even if the mother was sick with her monthly period the family would still move somewhere the next day by boat. That was how our people used to carry on with their lives. If there was no sickness after the birthing the family would go to where the caribou were. That was the way it was for many years … That was how our ancestors practiced their lives on the land. (Monique Mackenzie, February 2nd, 2016).*

Elders discouraged pregnant women near full-term from going out to hunt and trap with their husbands.

However, in cases where families were out all winter on the trap line, some women would be on their own when giving birth.
While it was common for midwives and other Tłı̨chǫ women to tend to births, there were many occasions when a woman's husband was the only person present to help deliver their child. It was therefore crucial that men also knew how to deliver a child for the sake of the mother's and baby's survival.

> *When the women started labor, the man would set up camp, including a separate place for her to give birth. He would attend to her. If they were a short distance from their camp, or that of another family, the man would help with the delivery and then would take the women, and baby on the sled to the camp. If they had no dogs the man would walk ahead to camp and leave the women and baby to follow, making her own trail, when she had rested. If she got cold, she made her own fire. (Georgina Chocolate, personal communication).*

Melanie Weyallon shared a story about Robert Mackenzie's wife Laizà having four men help her with her delivery.

> *Robert Mackenzie told me this story. He said they had left by boat and came upon Mısècho who was living on an island with his wife. Robert's wife was pregnant and they got frozen in just when Laizà went into labour. He said there was himself, his blind father, his brother Francis, and Adele Camile.*
>
> *Blind as he was, Robert's father told them what to do. His younger brothers were too afraid to touch her but they supported her while Robert told her to hold on to the stick. Robert said he had followed his father's instruction to set up the stick. He said that he was there beside her when his son was delivered by his own hands. He said he didn't know what to do with the baby laying on the floor. His father told*

Source: Library and Archives Canada.

> *him to tie the umbilical cord until it looks like the blood will not seep out. So he said he did that. Then he said to cut the umbilical cord. Robert said he did that. His father told him to check the baby again, so he checked the baby's umbilical cord and there was no blood. Then his father said it was okay.*
>
> *Laizà had moss ready so he put the baby on the moss diaper and gave the baby to Laizà. Then the afterbirth came out next. His father told him to put the afterbirth in something so he did. His father told him to lay some bedding down for Laizà so she does not get sick. So he said they did that while his blind father was telling them what to do. So Robert said he delivered his oldest son William. Mısècho's wife who was on the other island was worrying that Laizà was pregnant and that the men didn't know how to deliver a baby. That happened when they were at Kweghaı̨lı̨ beside that big mountain called Weyıats'atlaa on the James Lake portage. (Melanie Weyallon, February 2nd, 2016).*

In addition to sharing his story with Melanie Weyallon, Robert Mackenzie told this story in the early 1990s. When Tłı̨chǫ students first started attending schools established under the Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, Robert Mackenzie felt that women's knowledge was not being respected. Allice Legat (2012:32) recorded his explanation of why women's knowledge, particularly about childbirth, is important for women and men know:

> *Young men do not think they need women's stories or elders' stories, but you never know when you will need to think with them. My father not only had the narratives, he had women's knowledge. My daughter and wife may have died. We must tell out grandchildren so they can listen even if they think it isn't important - we should keep giving them our stories and keep recording our narratives for the future (Robert Mackenzie in Legat 2012:32).*

Source: NWT Archives.

Being knowledgeable about childbirth for survival was a central theme in the four elder's stories. Monique Mackenzie told her story about her father having to help her mother deliver her younger brother Edward Wetrade. Her family was traveling by dog team across Great Bear Lake when they had to stop in the middle of it because her mother went into labour. This required her father to quickly build a fire, make a tent, prepare a blanket for her mother to give birth on and make spruce bough tea. In Monique's story below, her mother credits her father for helping her and baby survive.

> *I am going to talk about the time when my younger brother Edward Wetrade was born on the snow. In February my mother went into labour. At that time I had become a young woman so l was living in a puberty hut. It was a spruce hut with a fire pit in the center with the two entrances. In those days there were no napkins for our menstrual period, there was nothing like that. I often think, what did we use?*

Source: NWT Archives.

> *We were out of meat and the caribou were far away. So my father said we should leave because my mother was pregnant. So we left in February for the barren land following many lakes. As for myself I was not allowed to travel on the trail: that was the way our parents were, they were very strict. Because my mother was pregnant we came and stopped somewhere over the portage to Great Bear Lake. Then the men left us to go on ahead. Grandfather Wetàhdè, ʔaìgǫą and uncle Zǫ̀ǫ̀ who were travelling with us left us. My mother said, 'I can't travel another day, my tummy is really hurting.' So we spent another night there. My sisters Celine and Bella and my younger brother, the three of them came and I sat in the tent too, since I entered it. My mother had packed a bag of moss, a pair of scissors and a thread wrapped in a bundle.*
>
> *With those things my father drove Mother by dogteam way out onto the great lake and traveled on and on until they reached a long peninsula. She said they made a fire there because Mother was in so much pain. At the very end of the lake they came to the empty camp of the men who had gone ahead*

and they decided to spend the night there.

They found some drying poles there. Mother said my father had a rosary wrapped on his wrist as he made a fire. She said she could not sit any longer in the sled because the child was about to be born. So with only a fire burning Father drove a post into the snow and tied a stick to it like this. He turned the sled onto its side and pulled out the caribou fur hide with Mother on it from the sled. He laid the Hudson's Bay blanket beside her and said that was all he could do and started to put more wood on the fire. He kept saying, 'My God protect me from danger' as he was building a big fire. It was very dark at that time because it was February.

He chopped lots of wood so there was a huge bonfire burning among the birch wood and the flames were going way up into the air. At this moment she was about to give birth so he lay the blanket on her. He kept on burning a fire so huge that water was dripping from the trees and he was also praying and talking about God out loud. Then [Father] kept watching over me because the child had been born. He had a flashlight and he had checked the child. He said, 'Madeline, it is my boy, what should I do with it?' They said he said that! He took off an old fur shirt that he was wearing. He warmed it up and wrapped the baby in it. Mother was also carrying some moss. He cut off the baby's umbilical cord and tied it. She said Father did that.

It was about this time of the year in the winter, out in the snow, when he cut off the baby's umbilical cord and wrapped the baby in the warmed shirt, warmed from the big bonfire that was so big the water was dripping from the trees. Mother said her knees were cold from the birth fluid so he cut off the edge of the fur mat she was kneeling on and used it to pull her closer to the fire. Mother said that was how Father hurried about doing everything he could do. When a child is born they say its afterbirth comes out too; well it came out right after the baby. Father had to push that and the blood aside and he pulled Mother closer to the fire on the fur mat she was on. He took down a blanket from a tent pole and he covered her.

I guess the fluid from the baby's mouth hadn't come out so he heated some water in a kettle and gave a hot cup of tea to mother. He said, 'Madeline, they say there is a God on earth, that there really is a God on earth. I would be so thankful to Him if I get through this' he said, as he held on to the rosary on his wrist. Father had spent the whole night keeping the fire burning for her but without any food. Then from the distance we saw the dog team coming toward us. We were waiting for them, father driving our mother back to our camp. He drove the dogteam straight to the entrance of our tent. Then mother said, 'Daughter, I may catch a cold, so quickly take out the ashes from the hot stove and pour it on a bed of spruce boughs. Put some clothing on top of it and lay me on it,' she said. So we poured the ashes among the spruce boughs to make it warm and we laid her on it and baby Ediwà too. The child was suffocating because the fluid had not come out of his mouth. That was also the problem. In those days there was no medicine but Mother had some beaver grease (castor oil), which she put in his mouth. Whatever she did, the stuff was coming out of his mouth. She was really was doing all she could for that child in that one tent we were living in, and she was also worried about getting sick with pneumonia. In those days long ago we didn't have pads for blood, we had only moss. I kept putting hot moss underneath her clothing like she told me to. That is what I did for her.

Father said he had to go to check the fishnets that he had set before so that he could feed the dogs. After he said that he made a herbal drink for Mother. He made the tea from boiled chopped white spruce boughs with the stems. He said to her, 'Madeline drink it while it is still hot.' So she did. White spruce bough tea is said to be a good medicine. Mother said she drank and drank that herbal drink all night and survived the night feeling better. The birth fluid from the child's mouth seemed to be coming out. The beaver grease may have caused it to keep coming out. It was the end of February. We still lived there in that one tent for a long time. Father killed a moose and later they brought my grandmother, who has since passed away, to live with us there.

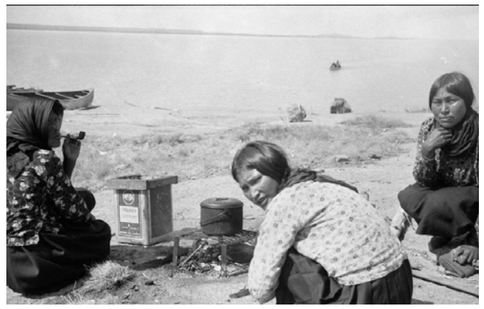
So my mother had many children but not one of them was born in the hospital, they were all born in the bush. Some have died; I think she said she lost three children. With my younger brother who froze to death that would make four deaths in the family. Today I don't know how many of us are still alive. We were raised mainly in the Northwest for many years. From my father's family, the Wetrade's, now only my uncle Romie Wetrade from Gamètì is still alive, along with his children and grandchildren. The people who lived in the barren land, in the Gots'ǫkààtì (Mesa Lake) area like ʔǫdoògǫą's father, none of them are alive, they have all passed away. (Monique Mackenzie, January 14th 2016).[1]

3.8 Summary of Results

These stories highlight important connections between Tłı̨chǫ peoples and places of birth. Birthplace sites are rich in cultural and ecological information, in addition to being representative of relationships between people and particular places. The elder's stories demonstrate the importance of both women and men having knowledge and being knowledgeable about childbirth in order to survive on the land. Dora Migwi's statement below captures why it is important for youth to listen to their stories:

> *The stories [our elders] have been telling us are for our children in the future; to make good history books for them to read so that they would know how our ancestors once traveled and lived on the land. (Dora Migwi, February 2nd, 2016).*

Source: NWT Archives.



Source: Library and Archives Canada.

Source: NWT Archives.

Source: NWT Archives.

1 Story originally recorded and published in Kuntz (2016)

Source: Tłı̨chǫ Government.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This report has highlighted the inextricable links between birthplaces, *dè* (land) and Tłı̨chǫ identity. The elder's stories reveal that birthplaces and childbirth are connected to Tłı̨chǫ way of life as they often occurred on the land wherever women were traveling at the time. More broadly, the elder's stories about birthplaces and childbirth point to their richness in cultural and ecological information. Traditional practices such as the collecting particular medicines, collecting moss used for diapers, caring for the afterbirth and umbilical cords, eating country foods, breastfeeding and the use of other materials, such as beaver grease used for clearing fluids from a newborn, were crucial to the mother's and baby's survival.

Lastly, this report points to the importance of listening to and sharing Tłı̨chǫ elder's stories about birthplaces with younger and future generations. Although giving birth on the land was said to be challenging, the elders maintain that working together and supporting one another was crucial to their survival. Working together and listening to their stories, the elders affirm, is vital for younger generations to live and carry on the Tłı̨chǫ way of life.

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