



Reclaiming Names

The Story

Mother Shene Catholique-Valpy has been fighting to change the GNWT's policy on legal names since 2015. Her fight began when Vital Statistics told her she would not be able to obtain a birth certificate for her daughter Sahai?a May Talbot using her baby's given name.

Sahai?a contains a glottal stop – a character in Shene's language, Dëne Sų́nė Yatıé (Chipewyan). Removing the glottal stop would change both the pronunciation and the meaning of Sahai?a, "when the sun just peaks through."

The GNWT's policy allows only characters from the Roman alphabet in names on legal identity documents such as birth certificates. Under this policy, Shene and other NWT residents wishing to use the traditional spelling for Indigenous names have to change the spelling of the name or change the name entirely to obtain legal identity documents.

The Issue

Many Dene, Cree and Inuvialuit lost their Indigenous names as a result of colonization. Former students and Survivors of residential schools for example, had their Indigenous names replaced with Christian names. In other cases, people's names were changed by government officials during various administrative processes. Often, names were changed because missionaries and officials were unable to spell or pronounce Indigenous names.

Reclaiming Indigenous names and their spelling for many people is part of decolonization.

According to former MLA Steven Nitah, "If reconciliation is going to happen, we have to accept Indigenous people for who they are, who we are and how we want to express ourselves. Whether it's through dance, song, or the names we choose for our children." (1)

Dene languages expert, Brent Kaulback likens the disallowing of Indigenous language characters on all government forms to the disallowing a letter from the English alphabet on these forms. (2) Imagine if one day everyone was disallowed from using the letter T.

For Shene Catholique-Valpy, the issue is about more than just spelling. "Yes, we can spell it back to its original name, but the thing is that we can't use the traditional name," Shene said. "So in turn, you're still losing the meaning of the name. You're still having to colonize your Indigenous name that you're given." (3)

Shene chose to lodge a formal complaint with the NWT's Language Commissioner. For more than a year, her daughter Sahai?a went without a birth certificate while the complaint was being processed. The Language Commissioner at the time determined that the Vital Statistics Act violated the spirit and intent of the NWT's Official Languages Act by not allowing for names that contain fonts, diacritical marks and symbols. (4)



The Outcome

Shene's story has drawn territorial and national attention and has prompted some policy change.

In 2017, the GNWT changed the Vital Statistics Act to allow for the use of a single traditional name as one's legal name on a birth certificate. The name must be based on the resident's traditional culture. The act was also changed to include a third option for gender on birth certificates to allow individuals to change the gender on their birth certificates without first having to undergo gender reassignment surgery. (5)

As of 2019, however, residents are still unable to use Indigenous characters on legal identity documents.

The GNWT recognizes that accommodating Indigenous characters is an important step in building a culture of respect and trust. It continues to work to update its databases so this can happen. It is also working to find a way to have Indigenous fonts interact with other databases across the country. Waiving the fees for residential school survivors and their families to reclaim their Indigenous names is also planned. (6)

A working group has been set up to develop a transliteration guide as a possible solution to accommodating Indigenous fonts on passports.

For Shene, the changes are positive but don't go far enough. To get the services her family needs, Shene has temporarily adjusted the spelling of Sahai'a's name and Sahai'a's sister's name, Ná'èl. Once the policy change happens, Shene plans to do all of her family name changes together.

1. [GNWT, "News Release: GNWT Introduces Changes to the Vital Statistics Act," July 28, 2017](#)

2. [Erin Brohman and Garrett Hinchey, "Chipewyan baby name not allowed on N.W.T. birth certificate," CBC News, March 6, 2015](#)

3. [Priscilla Hwang, "Mom says N.W.T. government still forcing Indigenous people use 'colonized version' of their names," CBC News, September 19, 2018](#)

4. ["N.W.T. ID should allow Dene symbols, says languages commissioner," CBC News, October 13, 2015](#)

5, 6. [GNWT, "News Release: GNWT Introduces Changes to the Vital Statistics Act," July 28, 2017](#)