Heidi Konttinen

VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF WEST GREENLANDIC REGALIA AND KNOWLEDGE OF SEAL SKINS

ABSTRACT

Since the earliest colonial encounters in Greenland, place-based Inuit knowledge of seal skin processing has been applied and regenerated within a web of regional, national, and global relations. These relations have not only affected methods, materials and designs, but also shaped the societal role of women practicing these skills. This article examines contemporary *kalaallisuut* (West Greenlandic regalia) making by studying the experiences of its makers and identifying the everyday challenges affecting current practice. Nine semi-structured interviews and a review workshop revealed three main challenges: a lack of appropriate space in which to process seal skins; insufficient compensation; and knowledge-sharing issues. These challenges are examined by scrutinising their root causes, which are frequently connected to colonialism and coloniality; gender, racial, and class inequities; and economic challenges to nation-building. Ultimately, participants envisioned a communal space as a potential response to all three challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Kalaallisuut is a West Greenlandic regalia worn on special occasions. Making *kalaallisuut* is described as a world-making practice that creates and narrates the stories between the Inuit, the sea, seals, colonial power, and other place-based relations (Dyrendom Graugaard 2020), while wearing *kalaallisuut* expresses pride, solemnity, and Greenlandic identity (Jakobsen 2011). In recent years, the public and academic discussion on *kalaallisuut* has revolved around the meanings and rules embedded in designing, making, and wearing *kalaallisuut*. At the centre of these discussions lie questions related to the traditional/modern dichotomy, such as the acceptability of making changes to *kalaallisuut*. Considering the significant changes West Greenlandic clothing design, materials, and methods have undergone over the centuries, previous research on the subject (see, e.g., Rossen 2020; Jakobsen 2011; Dyrendom Graugaard 2020) has argued against the idea of *kalaallisuut* as static, instead viewing the regalia as dynamic and ever-changing—like any living tradition. Another topical question addressed by Greenlandic scholar Rosannguaq Rossen (2020) and Danish-Greenlandic scholar Naja Dyrendom Graugaard (2020) concerns who has the right to make changes to *kalaallisuut* and on what terms. These discussions are connected to cultural appropriation, fashion, and the impact of missionaries' ideas of morally acceptable apparel. Extending the scope of these discussions to encompass research on all Inuit clothing across the Arctic, previous studies have

addressed advanced skin processing and sewing methods (Oakes et al. 1995; Issenman 2014); entanglements of spiritual, social, and material relations (Fienup-Riordan 2007; Dowsley 2015); the impact of sewing on Inuit women's health and identity (Emanuelsen et al. 2020; Greene and Zawadski 2022); and the meaning of wage employment given the contemporary practice of sewing (Flora et al. 2021; Pearce and Emanuelsen 2021). However, the everyday challenges of *kalaallisuut*-making as well as of skin processing and sewing have attracted less academic interest despite their significance for the practitioners themselves. The need for this type of study emerged from discussions I had prior to this research amongst teachers from *Kalaallisuuliornermik Ilinniarfik* (hereafter, *KI*), the only vocational school in Greenland that provides a degree in *kalaallisuut*-making. *Kalaallisuut*-making is significant not only for the availability of regalia, but also for the future of West Greenlandic Inuit knowledge on seal skins. Making shorts and boots in the form of *kalaallisuut* appears to be one of the primary reasons why scraping, drying, dyeing, and sewing seal skins are practiced in West Greenland. As such, the future of knowledge on seal skin processing is interwoven with the future of *kalaallisuut*-making.

In this article, I draw attention to the everyday life of a *kalaallisuuliortoq* (a *kalaallisuut* maker, pl. *kalaallisuuliortut*).[1] Semi-structured interviews conducted in Sisimiut, Greenland, shed light on the material and social relations embedded in *kalaallisuut*-making and in processing seal skins using traditional methods.[2] This article aims to study the experiences of *kalaallisuuliortut* and the societal structures that either support or limit the practice and future of *kalaallisuut*-making. The conclusions that emerged from the interview responses and a workshop revealed three primary contemporary challenges: a lack of appropriate space for processing seal skins; insufficient compensation; and knowledge-sharing issues. These three challenges also represent the main leverage points. In this article, I describe (i) how these challenges affect *kalaallisuuliortut*, (ii) their origin and relation to colonial history, and (iii) how these challenges may be addressed from the perspectives of *kalaallisuuliortut*. Regarding visions for the future, those *kalaallisuuliortut* participating in this research all shared the idea of a communal space for *kalaallisuut*-making (referred to as a 'seal centre') which would at least partially respond to all three challenges mentioned above, but would require support from governing bodies.

On a broader scale, this article contributes to discussions regarding how colonialism and coloniality shape Indigenous economic, social, spiritual, material, and gender relations; how the inequities created infiltrate and remain within societal and governing structures; and how supporting the art of sewing seal skins could dismantle such inequities and restore relations based on Inuit values. The topics that emerged from the interviews, alongside the existing literature (Dybbroe 1988; Pedersen and Paniula 2014; Arnfred and Pedersen 2015) on seal skin processing and women's labour in Greenland, directed me to extend this research to encompass gendered dimensions of practicing place-based Inuit knowledge[3] in contemporary times, such as through addressing uneven resource allocation affecting women's cultural practices. This is an issue that the second *Arctic Human Development Report* (Nymand Larsen and Fondahl 2014: 493) indicated as one of the primary knowledge gaps in Arctic research in 2014. To my knowledge, this gap has persisted as a little-studied topic in the context of Greenlandic seal skin processing. Thus, this article discusses *kalaallisuuliortut* experiences

related to practicing place-based knowledge within a web of regional, national, and global relations in contemporary Greenland. Although the focus centres on the encounter of local as well as on regional, national, and global systems, these are not conceived as isolated bubbles. For instance, the current Greenlandic government, *Naalakkersuisut*, which lies in the hands of the Greenlandic people albeit based on the Danish system, forms a sort of cultural hybrid model of governance. Similarly, *kalaallisuut*-making has its origins in Inuit knowledge, while the practice regenerates through an interaction with the sociomaterial and economic demands of contemporary Greenlandic society, which is shaped by 300 years of colonial encounters (Dyrendom Graugaard 2020).

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

METHODOLOGY

> Many things in our modern world try to force us to be separated, isolated individuals. We separate the secular from the spiritual, research and academia from everyday life. It is my dream that we may turn away from this isolation to rebuild the connections and relationships that are us, our world, our existence. (Wilson 2008: 137)

The quote above is from Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson's (2008) book on Indigenous research methodologies, which has been quite influential in how I conducted my research and how I wrote this article. Wilson's book emphasises the relationality embedded in the Indigenous research paradigm (see also Kovach 2009)—that is, how research emerges from the interaction between all human and other-than-human participants (including the researcher), and thus represents a collaborative act. Against this backdrop, I think of this study as emerging from discussions between me and the other participants. Our backgrounds have affected the topics that we discussed, and, although I, as the researcher, carry responsibility for what is presented in this article, I do not claim ownership of the knowledge shared with me. With the speakers' permission, I take care to give credit to the speaker on each topic. This leads to another important point brought up by Wilson (2008): relational accountability. Relational accountability refers to caring for and the respectful treatment of those relationships created within research. This relates to research ethics, while also extending beyond them. For me, this means that research should be a good experience for all participants across all phases of research. A further methodological invention by Wilson (2008) concerns writing research in a manner that addresses relationality and relational accountability. According to Wilson (2008: 8–9), the stories emerge through the relationship between the one who tells the story and the one who hears it. Which stories are told and how depend upon the listener and the situation. Thus, the challenge for academic writing is that the writer cannot know the audience. Wilson (2008) experimented with a few different techniques, including writing some parts of his book in the form of letters to his sons. In this article, I address this challenge by aiming to keep my discussions with the participants separate from my discussion of other research. When I discuss previous research, I think about the academic audience, and when I write about discussions with participants, I think about them. Regarding the latter, I aim to embody in my writing an atmosphere true to the encounters about which I am writing. Thus, I applied an 'atmosphere check' during

the analysis and writing phases to address the situationality, ensure transparency, and avoid over- or misinterpreting the data. In practice, this means that I returned in my mind to those moments and checked the tone and situation of each subject discussed, aiming to remain faithful to those. For these reasons, the tone of the text varies throughout the article, depending upon whether I am writing about the experiences of the *kalaallisuut*-makers or the historical and political discussions addressed by previous research. I acknowledge that the atmosphere check represents only my experience of encounters with the research participants. Thus, I heavily rely on the success of communication during those encounters: Did I understand the meaning of the words shared with me? Did I interpret the tone of voice, body language, and other nonverbal communication cues correctly? How was my communication? I dealt with this by carefully listening and asking clarifying questions, yet the atmosphere described herein is still filtered through my body and cannot describe the experiences of anyone else.

This article is part of a wider study on the plurality of sustainabilities in the Arctic. That larger study aims to learn about the power relations between local and global approaches to sustainability through case studies from seal hunting communities in Finland and Greenland. Within the project, this article contributes to creating a better understanding of the local perspectives in Sisimiut, although here I do not partake in discussions surrounding sustainability. I am myself a Finnish–Karelian researcher from the Kainuu region (inland) of Finland, meaning that I have not grown up around seal hunting. I acknowledge my limited first-hand knowledge of seal hunting culture in Greenland and, therefore, it was clear from the beginning that this research required a collaborative process, from topic formation to producing this article. Whilst the guidelines for ethical research in Greenland are yet to be established, the Inuit Circumpolar Council's [ICC] *Ethical and Equitable Engagement Synthesis Report* (Inuit Circumpolar Council 2021) provided significant insights on the ethics of my research. I am also grateful to Jakku Bregnhøj from the Arctic Hub for deepening my understanding of the Greenlandic context. Although Greenland's *National Research Strategy* (Government of Greenland 2022) was published after my work had already begun, I view my research as aligning with its objectives. The contact points with participants were selected carefully in order to minimise research fatigue. Below, I describe this process in more detail.

I arrived at *Kalaallisuuliornermik Ilinniarfik* (*KI*) for an initial short visit in November 2021 to discuss the possibilities of collaboration in this research. *KI* is located in Sisimiut, the second largest town in Greenland with a population of over 5500. Prior to my arrival, I was in contact with *KI's* director, Kirstine Berthelsen. Upon my arrival, I was directed to meet with Pituaq Maria Kleist, a *kalaallisuut*-maker working as a teacher at the school. I presented the study I had conducted with seal hunters in Finland (Konttinen 2024) and asked if this type of study would be of interest to *kalaallisuut*-makers, and, if so, what kind of research objectives would be most meaningful to them. Pituaq explained the situation to me and outlined the challenges *kalaallisuut*-makers face in contemporary Greenland, including the lack of economic and material resources specifically. She brought up the inadequacy of funding for cultural activities and the need for better school premises. We agreed to meet again when I returned to Greenland for a second, longer visit, which eventually took place in October 2022. The purpose of my two-month-long

visit was to learn about the place, to meet people, and to further clarify the objectives of the research and elaborate how to conduct the study in an ethical manner. Because Pituaq was on maternity leave at that time, I met with Vera Lange Larsen, another skilled *kalaallisuut*-maker and teacher at *KI*. The topics raised by Vera were somewhat similar to those I had discussed with Pituaq, among them the challenges of practicing *kalaallisuut*-making as a profession. Informed by those discussions, the aim of this research was clarified to focus on the relations that support or limit the future of *kalaallisuut*-making.

No data were collected before my third visit in spring 2023, which lasted for two-and-a-half months. Right after my arrival, Vera and I reviewed our research ethics and drafted a list of potential participants to approach about joining the study. Semi-structured interviews with eight women who mastered the art of transforming seal skins into clothing and one male carver were conducted that spring, with some participants also attending a workshop later in June. The interview questions included topics surrounding learning, teaching, and practicing *kalaallisuut*-making. We also discussed the meanings and significance of *kalaallisuut* and *kalaallisuut*-making, the vocabulary appropriate to the topic, sustainability, and the participants' future visions and wishes. The audio-recorded interviews were analysed using inductive content analysis, which included drafting detailed notes from each interview and arranging them into themes, making it easier to situate each note within their relationalities. Forming the themes required several rounds of reviewing the material, aimed at combining only highly similar responses whilst retaining the diversity. The detailed notes were coded in NVivo to make it easier later to return to check who said what on each theme. The results of this first analysis were discussed during the workshop. In addition, the workshop included envisioning the functions of a seal centre and the next steps required to reach that goal. Comments, corrections, and clarifications from the review workshop are included in the final analysis. This article was also translated into Greenlandic for the participant review before submission. In alignment with the CARE principles of Indigenous data governance, the data will be stored in the Greenland National Archives in accordance with agreed upon terms.

In addition to the interviews and workshop, a deeper understanding on the topic was achieved through long-term communication and participatory methods. Collaboration with Vera continued throughout the research process in the form of informal discussions and a film project on *kalaallisuut*-making. In September 2024, our working group (Vera, movie artist Mauri Lähdesmäki, and I) filmed the entire process of *kalaallisuut*-making, along with seal hunting and interviews with a sled dog owner and the manager of the local meat market. I am also extremely grateful to Vera for teaching me to make *avittat*, seal skin embroidery, which provided me with first-hand experience of working on seal skins using Greenlandic methods. Making is a significant way of knowing for me, and, in other contexts, I have also learned to sew seal skin mittens and tan seal skin.

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

This study was conducted with seven *kalaallisuut*-makers, one seal skin seamstress, and one carver, all of whom live in the West Greenland. The participants were: Kirstine Berthelsen, director of *KI*; Pituaq Maria Kleist, *KI* alum and teacher; Vera Lange Larsen, *KI* alum and teacher; Ane Katrine Lynge, *KI* alum who taught at *Kittat* and *efterskole* (a community college) in Nuuk; Birgithe Lynge,

KI alum; Sofie Amondsen, *KI* alum and teacher at *Kittat* (Nuuk); Olga Ljungdahl, owner of the Panigiit store, who sews and sells products from Great Greenland seal skins; a *kalaallisuut*-maker who chose to remain anonymous; and Barse Svendsen, a carver and head of the local carvers' association, *Savituut*. Some of the interviews were conducted in English and some in Greenlandic with assistance from a local interpreter, Cecilie Berthelsen. Each participant signed a consent form before the interview. Although the number of participants is small, the *KI* teachers are in contact with the alum and other practitioners around Greenland, making them experts in describing the contemporary context of *kalaallisuut*-making.

SOCIOMATERIAL RELATIONS IN SEAL HUNTING

Similar to Inuit clothing from precolonial times, a finished regalia in its entirety represents the sum total of social relations. In this section, I first describe how these relations unfold from a gender perspective, then map the relations within contemporary practice, and, finally, identify broken relations. In doing so, I denote the first challenge: the lack of a proper space within which to process raw seal skins.

THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR IN *KALAALLISUUT*-MAKING

Making *kalaallisuut* is typically women's work. Mothers and grandmothers take responsibility for providing *kalaallisuut* to their families, although sometimes men can also take responsibility for this task. To illustrate this gender division, all 51 graduates of *KI* are women, and in *Kittat* (a community house in Nuuk which offers space in which to make *kalaallisuut*, and houses regalia of its own which can also be rented), the majority of customers renting *kalaallisuut* or participating in courses on making parts of *kalaallisuut* consists of women (Amondsen 2023). However, this gendered work must be defined on Inuit term. Greenlandic scholar Karla Jessen Williamson (2011) solidly established this perspective in her dissertation, *Inherit my Heaven: Kalaallit Gender Relations*. Williamson (2011: 87) argues that labour—similar to other elements of Inuit society—is at the core genderless: 'work is carried out with the purpose of ensuring a relatively safe continuation of the human relationship with the various animals and *nuna*[4] [land] souls'. This applies to work performed by men and women alike. Thus, men's and women's work are of equal importance, neither superior to the other. When I suggested during the workshop that women are responsible for providing *kalaallisuut* to their families, Olga clarified that men are freed from that task since they attend to hunting. Yet, Ane Katrine noted that, occasionally, men order a *kalaallisuut* for their daughters and participate in design decisions. Similarly, women can participate in hunting. Attending to the tasks often associated with the other gender can be guided by interest and talent, but also reflect a sense of reciprocity. Mark Nuttall (1992) learned in the late 1980s during ethnographic work in Kangersuatsiaq that men had started to flense seals to ease women's workloads. This resulted from a crash in the international market for seal skins, which left women with no or little monetary compensation for preparing the skins (Nuttall 1992: 139–140). Thus, the division of labour in Inuit seal hunting is frequently based on gender, although the tasks are equally valued and sometimes mixed regardless of gender. Furthermore, various tasks are somewhat spiritually interwoven, whereby taking good care of the catch ensures a good hunting fortune in the future. For example, Bodenhorn (1990) and Fienup-Riordan (2007) in studies amongst

the Alaskan Inuit, suggest that the woman's role in seal hunting is not limited to processing the catch, consisting of tasks such as preparing the meat, sewing the skin, and generously sharing. All these tasks also contribute to the spiritually and socially correct treatment of the seal and welcoming the soul of the seal to return to the hunter. In this way, gender relations are connected to relations between humans and other-than-humans. However, here I emphasise that there are significant differences among the Inuit, whereby these examples simply serve to demonstrate the role of ontology in seal hunting.

MATERIALS, PEOPLE, AND SPACE NEEDED FOR MAKING *KALAALLISUUT*

Commonly, men's *kalaallisuut* includes a white fabric *anoraq* and black pants with *kamiit*—that is, seal skin boots. Women's *kalaallisuut* is more complex and takes much effort to fabricate the entire regalia. Typically, the parts of the *kalaallisuut* worn on the first day of school circulate within the family and amongst friends. Yet, the parts of the confirmation *kalaallisuut* remain in the original owner's possession for years, for the rest of their life even. If there are sufficient knowledge, skills, health, space, and equipment, the entire *kalaallisuut*—or some parts of it—is made by family members. The rest is either borrowed or bought. A Facebook group on *kalaallisuut* has become a popular space via which to buy and sell both new and used *kalaallisuut* parts. *Kalaallisuuliortut* frequently specialise in embroidery, skin, or other tasks according to their interests, talents, and skills (Lange Larsen 2023). For a harmonious outcome, one person may design the entire *kalaallisuut*, but the parts might originate from different sources as many of my interviewees explained to me during my research visit in 2023. Regardless of whether the parts of the *kalaallisuut* are made by family members, bought, or borrowed, a finished regalia is the embodiment of social relations (see also Dyrendom Graugaard 2020).

SEAL SKINS

The participants describe the seal skin parts of the *kalaallisuut* as typically made from a variety of seals which differ by species and age. The required properties and local availability of skins influence the type of seal and other skins used. In turn, the availability of skins is also affected by the distribution of hunters, who are unevenly dispersed across the country (Lange Larsen 2023; Berthelsen 2023; Kleist 2023). In addition, hunting preferences play a role in the availability of skins. For instance, Ane Katrine Lynge (2023) noted during an interview that it can be difficult to acquire skins from full-grown harp seals in Nuuk, because the meat is quite tough for humans and there are no sled dogs to eat the meat, rendering catching full-grown seals a low priority for hunters. In Sisimiut, most of the seal skins for *kalaallisuut* are bought or received from local hunters. When the school, *KI*, plans to buy skins, they contact hunters by leaving a request on the door of *Qimatulivik* (Image 1), a local marketplace where hunters sell meat and fish, or in the harbour. Sometimes, hunters also directly contact *kalaallisuuliortut* if they wish to sell skins. Hunters may also gift a family member, friend, or a skilled *kalaallisuuliortoq* skins. In Nuuk, access to seal skins is more limited. Thus, Sofia Amondsen (2023) frequently receives skins from her stepfather's home village. Her stepfather is too old to hunt himself, so the hunters from his village provide him with meat and skins, which Sofia describes as 'the old way'. In that village, there are not enough skilled people capable of using seal skins nor is there a *Great Greenland*—a Greenlandic government-owned

Image 1. Qimatulivik (April 2023), a local meat and fish market in Sisimiut. Photo credit: Author's own.

industrial tannery and fur house—trading post. They give the skins to Sofia, because she can use them. Trade can also take place via Facebook, which creates connections across Greenland. *Kalaallisuuliortut* can buy raw seal skins which are not locally available or treated skins which are no longer possible to prepare in the southern parts of Greenland due to the warming climate (Lange Larsen 2023).

In addition to the variety of seal species, *kalaallisuut* requires a variety of methods related to treating and sewing seal skin. The fat from the raw skins is scraped off using an *ulu* (a women's knife). Participants described finding *ulus* from Greenland easy, but many of them prefer *ulus* from northern Greenland. Industrially tanned seal skins are often sewn with a sewing machine and used for the collar and cuffs of the *kalaallisuut*. However, tanned skin is too soft for *kamiit* (boots) to remain in form, which requires skin treated and sewn using traditional methods. *Kamiit* are made from *unnaq*, a thoroughly scraped, dehaired, dried, and bleached seal skin. Drying *unnaq* requires freezing temperatures, and, although the process is still possible in Sisimiut, interpreting weather patterns is becoming more difficult (Lange Larsen 2023). When the colder days are sparse, *kalaallisuuliortoq*'s need for seal skins and the workload are unevenly dispersed on those cold days. Translator Cecilie Berthelsen summarised Ane Katrine Lynge's (2023) description of this:

> The cold time of the year is very limited, so she doesn't have a lot of time to process the skin and [?] it needs to be dried in the cold. So, in the wintertime, she was working everyday with skins, not stopping, because she needed them to dry when it was cold.

Both storing and treating the skins in cold temperatures could be solved through the use of large freezer containers (Lange Larsen 2023; A. K. Lynge 2023; see also Dyrendom Graugaard 2020).

SPACE FOR TREATING SEAL SKINS

The first main challenge to *kalaallisuut*-making unfolds in Figure 1, which illustrates how all the other parts of the *kalaallisuut* can be made anywhere, but handling seal skin requires better facilities. Contemporary homes are rarely suitable for working with raw skins and all the participants agree that the lack of appropriate space is one of the primary challenges to processing raw skins using traditional methods. Working on a seal skin is messy and requires a lot of water and good ventilation in order to remove the smells and moisture from the workspace. Bathrooms are too small for working with skins, seal fat stains are difficult to remove, and the blubber frequently clogs sewage systems not designed for that specific purpose. While the school, *KI*, has provided many individuals with the knowledge regarding how to turn a raw seal skin into a garment, the lack of appropriate space limits the practice employing that knowledge. All the other phases of *kalaallisuut*-making, such as repairing, beading, and sewing, can be completed anywhere. This specific issue is not limited to Sisimiut alone, with participants suggesting it is a common experience across Greenland. For instance, Sofia Amondsen (2023) explained the situation of *Kittat* in Nuuk:

> Once a week (...) you can come here to *Kittat* and use our materials for skin tanning. And [during] skin tanning… there is up to ten people that wants to be in our little space for… it's [a space] for 2–3 people who can be there, but they try to be there like three hours. It is not enough for the community.

The women have requested more hours from the municipality for skin processing with little success. Similarly, all *kalaallisuuliortut* participating in this study wanted support from the governing bodies to access better working premises for scraping, drying, and bleaching as well as for storing raw seal skins.

SOCIOECONOMICS OF *KALAALLISUUT*-MAKING

Trade has been a significant part of the seal hunting culture in Greenland for almost 300 years, albeit with limited benefit for *kalaallisuuliortut*. To respond to the needs of contemporary society, *kalaallisuuliortut* wish to enter the market economy via *kalaallisuut*-making. I begin this section by describing the prevailing limitations of practicing *kalaallisuut*-making as a trade and in earning a sufficient wage. I continue by examining the gender division of labour in seal hunting during the colonial years, which provides the historical background to the current challenges.

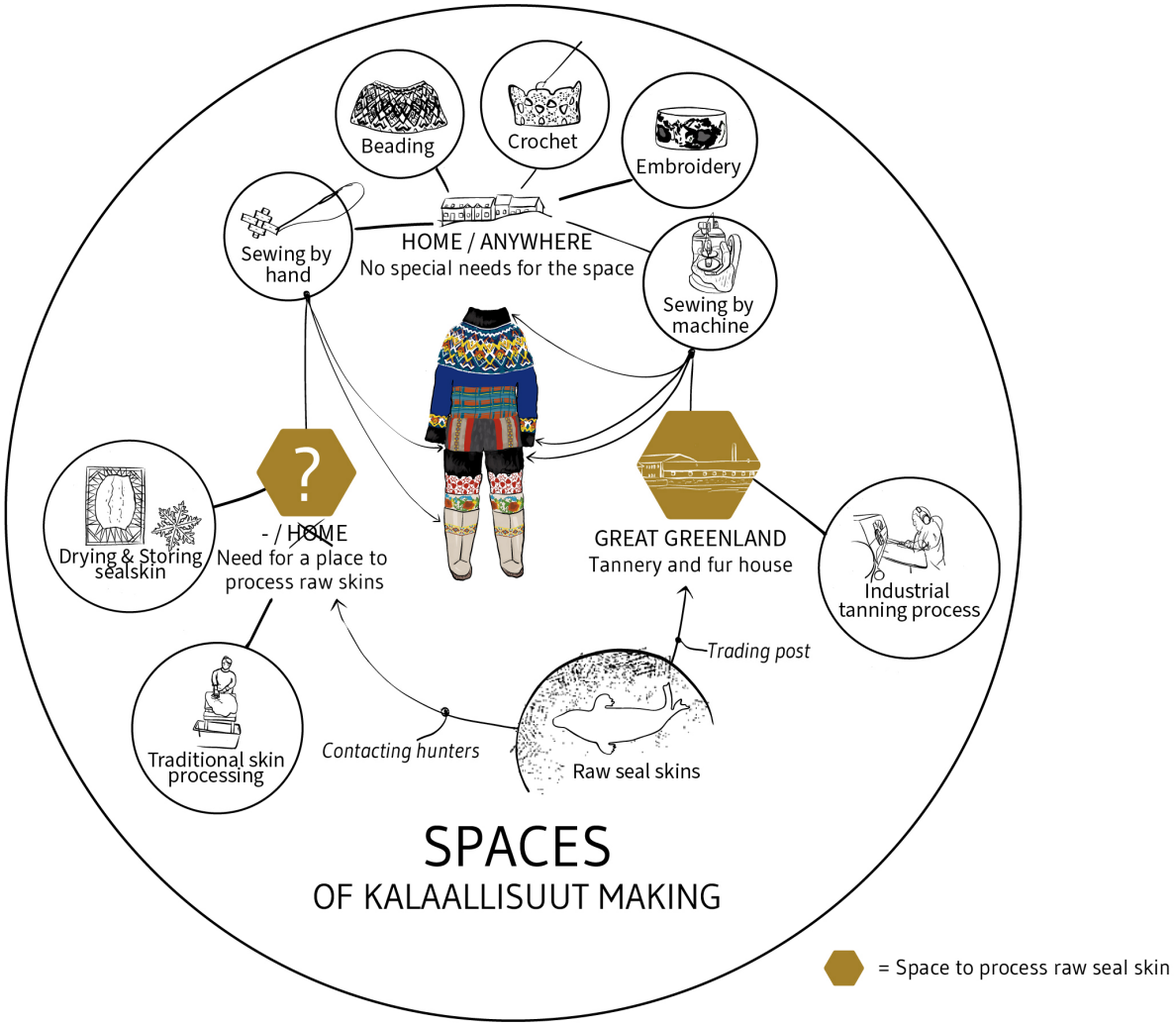

Figure 1. This figure illustrates the spaces where *kalaallisuut* are made. As shown, there is a significant need for a place to process seal skins using traditional methods, as well as for freezers in which to store and process the skins.

TRADE THROUGH *KALAALLISUUT*

Unlike seal hunting and the preparation of skins for export to Europe, knowledge on designing and sewing seal skin clothing was of less interest to colonial trade. Thus, it was not included in similar volumes on the market economy. While this undoubtedly has protected Greenlandic clothing from transforming into a commodity defined by European needs and preferences, the unprofitability of *kalaallisuut*-making is one of the major challenges today. The *kalaallisuuliortut* participating in this research hoped that making Greenlandic regalia or other skin-based clothing could offer them a sufficient income. However, none of the graduates of *KI* have been able to make a living through full-time work producing *kalaallisuut*. One major issue is that the amount of work required to make a single *kalaallisuut* is poorly understood by potential clients and, for that reason, *kalaallisuuliortut* are

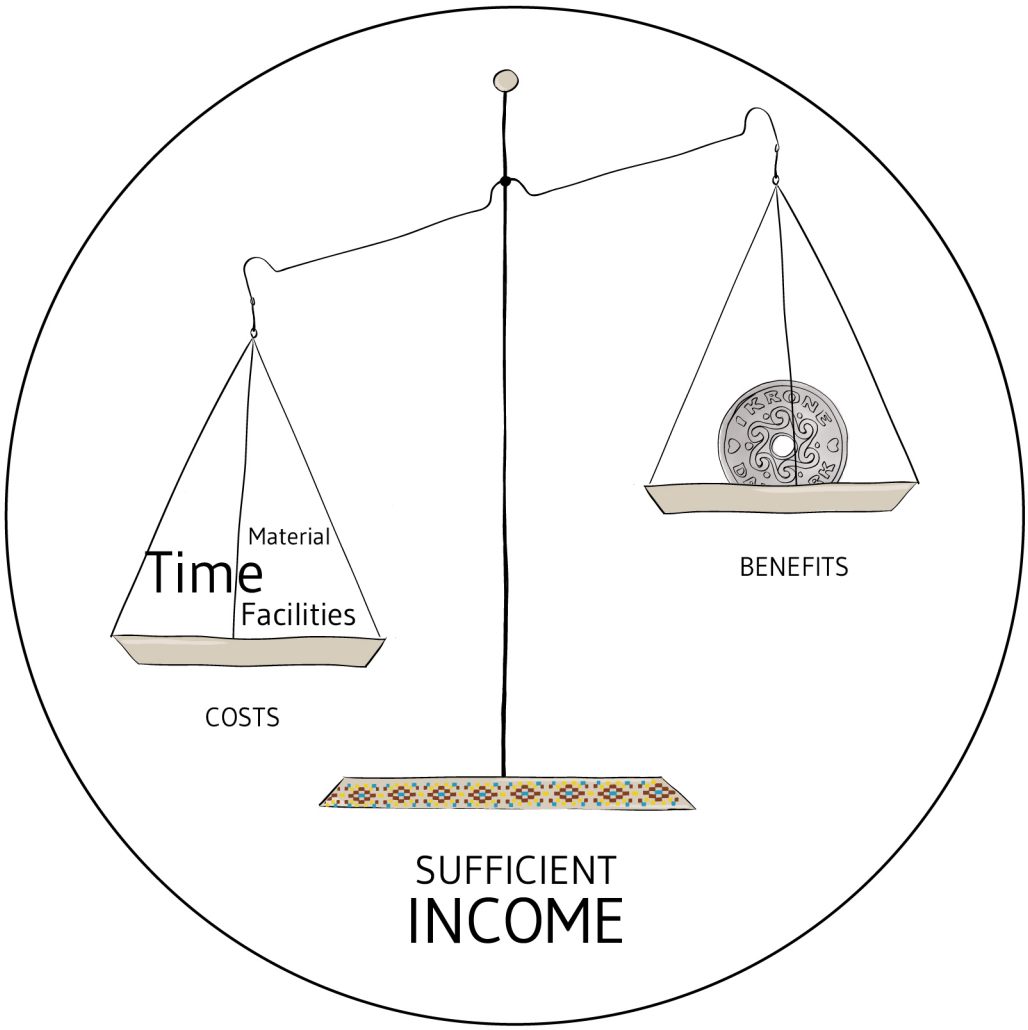

Figure 2. Imbalance between costs and income of *kalaallisuut*-making.

not paid sufficiently for their work. Making an entire *kalaallisuut* may take up to two years to complete, such that even applying a minimum hourly wage results in quite a high price. Thus, greater awareness of the workload involved in *kalaallisuut*-making is required in order to change people's expectations, rendering pricing more realistic (Lange Larsen 2023; Anonymous 2023; B. Lynge 2023; Kleist 2023). Teaching aside, there are currently no jobs for *kalaallisuuliortut*, with the only option starting one's own business (Berthelsen 2023). However, working with traditional methods is a lengthy process, whereby the preparations alone may take two years before any products are available to sell (Anonymous 2023). During this time, one must pay for their own workspace, tools, and materials on top of their everyday living expenses. Despite the large number of potential customers, the risks remain too high. This imbalance between costs and income is shown in Figure 2.

In addition to raising awareness of the workload involved in *kalaallisuut*-making, there

is a need to clarify the image of contemporary *kalaallisuuliortoq*. While society in general respects *kalaallisuuliortut* (Kleist 2023), there are some misconceptions about them and their work, including viewing *kalaallisuut* as a hobby rather than as a profession. Vera Lange Larsen's (2023) response to a question regarding *what limits* kalaallisuut-*making from becoming a profession* sheds light on this issue:

> Peoples' expectations of [how] the pricing is done, and the way they see us, *kalaallisuuliortut*. That we do it as our hobby. That has to change, too. Seeing us as professionals, like seeing this as our profession. An understanding of the process, they also have to learn. It doesn't have to be like they know the process, but the length of the process; they normally don't know how long it takes.

Kalaallisuuliortut consider this hobby-like image problematic, because income from making *kalaallisuut* is insufficient to cover their living expenses and they need to make their living elsewhere. Thus, they aim to make it affordable for *kalaallisuuliortut* to practice their profession.

COLONIAL IMPACT ON THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR IN GREENLAND

The practice of artisan labour has faced hardships everywhere following the introduction of cheaper industrial products. The challenge of *kalaallisuuliortut's* low wages is undoubtedly connected to this phenomenon, yet the *kalaallisuuliortut* themselves frequently explained during interviews that low wages result from viewing *kalaallisuut*-making as a hobby rather than as a trade. Framing *kalaallisuut*-making as a hobby relates to the issue of devaluing—or misunderstanding the value of—women's work, which may result from a colonial process or reflect the inability of a capitalist economy to comprehend 'women's wealth', as described by anthropologists Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (2017: 4). While fair monetary compensation for *kalaallisuuliortut* labour may represent a novel idea, it is worth noting that making clothing has always been a way for Inuit women to provide for their families. For instance, a study on the contemporary work regime in Nunavut suggests that, for many Inuit women, wage work provides a way to care for their families, which they view as 'replicat[ing] Inuit "traditional" gender roles, identities, and work allocation' (Quintal-Marineau 2017: 341). As such, I next examine the historical events in Greenland that relegated women's labour to the status of a hobby.

The idea of describing women's labour on seal skins as a hobby is relatively new in Greenland, stemming from the colonial impact on the gender division of labour. At the beginning of the colonial era, which began with the arrival of the Dano-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede to Greenland in 1721, Denmark's interests in Greenland revolved around the hunting of marine mammals. Large amounts of seal pelts and blubber were transported to European markets beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century (Marquardt 1999). Men attended to hunting, shared the meat, and traded a portion of the pelts and blubber not used by the household. Women's roles were—as it had been during precolonial times—to flense the seals, prepare food, and process the skins either for trade or for clothing (Dahl 2000). These centuries'-long colonial relations shaped seal hunting. Trade became a close-knit part of it, to the extent that trading seal skins later became an enabler of seal hunting, providing

money for hunting equipment and other living expenses (Dahl 2000; Wenzel 2000 [1991]). Trade also influenced clothing and aesthetics. Beads, fabric, and woollen items were selectively adopted into *kalaallit* designs. In fact, at present, only the skin portions of *kalaallisuut* have a connection to precolonial Greenlandic Inuit clothing, although the skin processing methods, similar to every living culture, have undergone transformations over time. The changes, history, and meanings embedded within *kalaallisuut* lie beyond the scope of this article, although some research on these subjects exists (Jakobsen 2011; Dyrendom Graugaard 2020; Rossen 2020).

In the early 1900s, Denmark's interest shifted from sealing towards fishing (Marquardt 1999), which significantly impacted Greenlandic Inuit socioeconomic structures. Although seal hunting held greater spiritual and social significance (Dybbroe 1988: 130), many young men chose fishing once its monetary value exceeded their income from hunting (Sejersen 2022). By 1945, fisheries economically exceeded seal hunting (Marquardt 1999). With the reduced significance of seal hunting, women's roles as co-producers within the family diminished (Dybbroe 1988; Arnfred and Pedersen 2015). This led to the redefinition of a woman's role in the family and in Greenlandic society more broadly. Such impacts from economic development related to gender relations in Greenland are examined in depth by Susanne Dybbroe (1988), who showed that, in precolonial Greenlandic society, women produced as much as men within the family, although their tasks differed. Caring for the skin, meat, and blubber was as important as hunting, whereby neither would prove meaningful without the other. However, the colonial administration failed to recognise the Greenlandic—or any—woman's role as a producer. Thus, commercial fishing was based on the European gender division of labour, which framed fishing as a male profession, despite fishing in Greenland previously representing a supplementary activity to hunting practiced by everyone in the household. Moreover, while processing seal skin was previously easily combined with the other household responsibilities of women such as childrearing, commercial fishing relocated all activities to outside the household, complicating women's opportunities to earn an income. Thus, women took short-term jobs in fish factories, albeit receiving less pay than men (Dybbroe 1988). As such, inequality between gender-based tasks had entered the Greenlandic sphere of production.

While a majority of Greenlandic women in colonial settlements sought ways to earn an income, the ideal role for the wives of the Greenlandic elite became similar to Danish housewives. Kirsten Bransholm Pedersen and Najaaraq Paniula (2014; see, also, Arnfred and Pedersen 2015) interpreted this process through Maria Mies's (2014 [1986]) concept of *housewifisation,* explaining how the introduction of the global capitalist economy situated women as politically and economically inferior to men. Mies (2014 [1986]: 120–121) describes in her iconic book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* that housewifisation did not occur everywhere in the same way: in the Third World [sic], women became cheap labour for the commodities that women in the First World sought to buy. In both worlds, women's work only supplemented the work conducted by their husbands. This logic is problematic, because if women's labour is not considered real work, women have no access to the same salary and workers' rights as men. Mies (2014 [1986]: 134–135) illustrated this through the example of lacemakers in India, where handicraft production is practiced by housewives (not workers) in

their free-time (as a hobby, not during working hours), and, therefore, their incomes remain well below the minimum wage and women are left without access to employee rights and benefits. Framing *kalaallisuut*-making as a hobby affects its pricing in the same way that housewifisation limits the pricing of women's labour by arguing that it is only supplementary—that is, not real work. I, therefore, claim that both models of housewifisation have been mobilised in Greenland: *kalaallisuut*-makers are treated like Third World [sic] housewives, and the wives of the Greenlandic elite were shaped through education in order to become similar to Danish housewives. The latter process is discussed in more detail in the subsequent section on education.

To summarise, the colonial years narrowed women's roles as producers. Although inequities stemming from coloniality have decreased in many spheres of contemporary life, framing *kalaallisuut*-making as a hobby continues to carry the burden of the past.

SOCIAL, MATERIAL, AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

The third challenge addressed by the *kalaallisuuliortut* surrounds issues related to knowledge-sharing. The assimilation politics following World War II deteriorated the practice of and access to knowledge on *kalaallisuut*-making and the processing of seal skins. The consequences of that deterioration are still felt today through the lack of teachers and the limited teaching of *kalaallisuut*-making. In essence, the resources available for teaching do not meet the widespread interest in learning. The interviews conducted in 2023 indicated that many individuals have no one to teach them (see also Jakobsen 2011: 399), representing another primary reason explaining why some of the participants of this study have sought knowledge from *Kalaallisuuliornermik Ilinniarfik (KI)*. In this section, I review the contemporary situation regarding knowledge-sharing in *kalaallisuut*-making and in skin crafts more broadly, which I conclude by discussing its relation to the colonial history of education in Greenland.

KNOWLEDGE-SHARING ABOUT KALAALLISUUT IN CONTEMPORARY *GREENLAND*

Kalaallisuuliornermik Ilinniarfik (*KI*; Image 2), the only vocational school providing a degree in making national Greenlandic regalia, aims to keep the tradition alive (Lange Larsen 2023). Assimilation resulted in a generation who never learnt to process skins, such that a school is needed for collecting and sharing this knowledge (Kleist 2023). However, Kirstine remarked that the goals of education have changed and developed over the years and continue to do so today. *KI* was founded in 2010 and, initially, the idea was to teach a variety of designs, including jewellery making, although the focus soon shifted to *kalaallisuut* and a range of skin-processing techniques. The school employs permanent teachers and highly skilled practitioners from across Greenland (Berthelsen 2023). Currently, the focus lies on teaching West Greenlandic regalia (*kalaallisuut*), but the teachers and students participating in this study emphasised recognition of the variety of knowledges from North, East, and South Greenland. During the two-year-long education programme, students learn to make women's and men's *kalaallisuut* from scratch through to the final product. After completing their education, students may choose to participate in an additional six-month programme, in which they can apply knowledge from the basic

Image 2. *Kalaallisuuliornermik Ilinniarfik* (May 2023). Photo credit: Author's own.

education to learn and develop new methods and designs. The outcome may include other Greenlandic regalia, work clothes, or the students' own designs. There is a high interest in learning *tunumiutuut* (East Greenlandic regalia) or *arnatuut* (North Greenlandic regalia), since they have been less influenced by colonialism (B. Lynge 2023).

Previously, knowledge was transferred from one generation to the next by watching-and-learning. Currently, however, opportunities to watch are rare. Thus, there is a need for other ways of learning and teaching. Vera explained that the watch-and-learn method is poorly adaptable to the school environment. The school, therefore, has developed new ways of teaching. In fact, the school created all of the teaching materials and methods since its existence. Amongst its latest achievements is a textbook created by Kirstine, Maria, and Vera which is used in teaching. Although the emphasis of education is on West Greenlandic regalia, knowledge from across Greenland is, to some extent, included in the curriculum. Kirstine (Berthelsen 2023) described that, if they hear of a person who is extremely good at some technique, they may either travel to learn from that person or invite them to teach their expertise at the school. In this way, the content of education continues evolving.

One structural challenge of teaching *kalaallisuut*-making in a vocational school is the lack of time to learn and to become confident in the craft. Students attending *KI* rarely have any prior skin processing or sewing skills, and two years of training is a very short time during which one can learn all that is needed for making *kalaallisuut*. The workload is high, which is especially challenging for those with families. Instead of the current two years, the school

hopes to extend the education to three years.[5] If the education were extended to three years, the students would gain more experience in different types of sewing methods (Berthelsen 2023) and there would be time to correct mistakes and the possibility of mastering particularly challenging domains (Lange Larsen 2023). Many also mentioned that two years is not a sufficient length of time to become confident in working with seal skins, and without confidence the threshold to start one's own company remains rather high. The former students participating in this study are all grateful for the knowledge they gained through their education on the history, culture, and techniques of *kalaallisuut*-making, but wanted more time to practice their skills.

PARALLEL FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

In contemporary Greenland, there is a great need for a range of places where passing on knowledge related to and the processing of seal skins can take place. Attending the two-year-long intensive education at *KI*, with few opportunities to make a living from those skills, is only affordable to some. Many also wish to learn more about a specific skill, rather than the entire process. The teachers at *KI* have been interested in sharing their knowledge in other formats such as through short courses, although the structure of the school does not allow *KI* to receive money for arranging courses for others beyond its students (Lange Larsen 2023). Individual phases of the *kalaallisuut*-making process are occasionally taught at evening schools (*efterskolerneq*) organised either by a municipality or a city. However, teaching skin processing would require an appropriate space. In Nuuk, *Kittat* offers some courses and a space for processing skins, but the need is much greater than the resources afford. Moreover, some skilled practitioners willing to share their knowledge do so only in private settings (Kleist 2023). At best, teaching takes place in person; however, given the long distances between villages not connected by roads, additional teaching materials are needed, including videos, books, and other self-study materials (Lange Larsen 2023; B. Lynge 2023). Currently, such materials remain scarce.

Teaching methods are not the only thing changing: education, in general, is now more focused on teaching adults and youngsters rather than children, who were the main beneficiaries of watching-and-learning approaches as practiced in the home. I discussed this with Ane Katrine Lynge (2023), who brought up the important point of bringing *kalaallit* knowledge to children as well. She argued that, although working with raw skin at home is challenging, on the bright side, her children can see and participate in the process. They help scrape the skins, learn the terminology, and recognise the different parts of the process. Working from home also allows Ane Katrine to spend more time with her children and show them the entire process from the hunt to a finished product. According to Ane Katrine, this teaches children about the culture, the value of the catch, and the no-waste principle.

To the participants' knowledge, parts of the *kalaallisuut*-making process have thus far not been included in the primary school curriculum. However, Ane Katrine expressed interest in doing so. This directs attention to the education system and the relation between the Danish and Greenlandic Inuit ways of knowing. Expanding teaching on skin processing in primary school could also bring *kalaallit* knowledge to children whose parents have not received it. Since the introduction of Home Rule, the people of Greenland have had the power to decide upon the curriculum. Whilst the Greenlandisation of the curriculum took place, it largely focused on

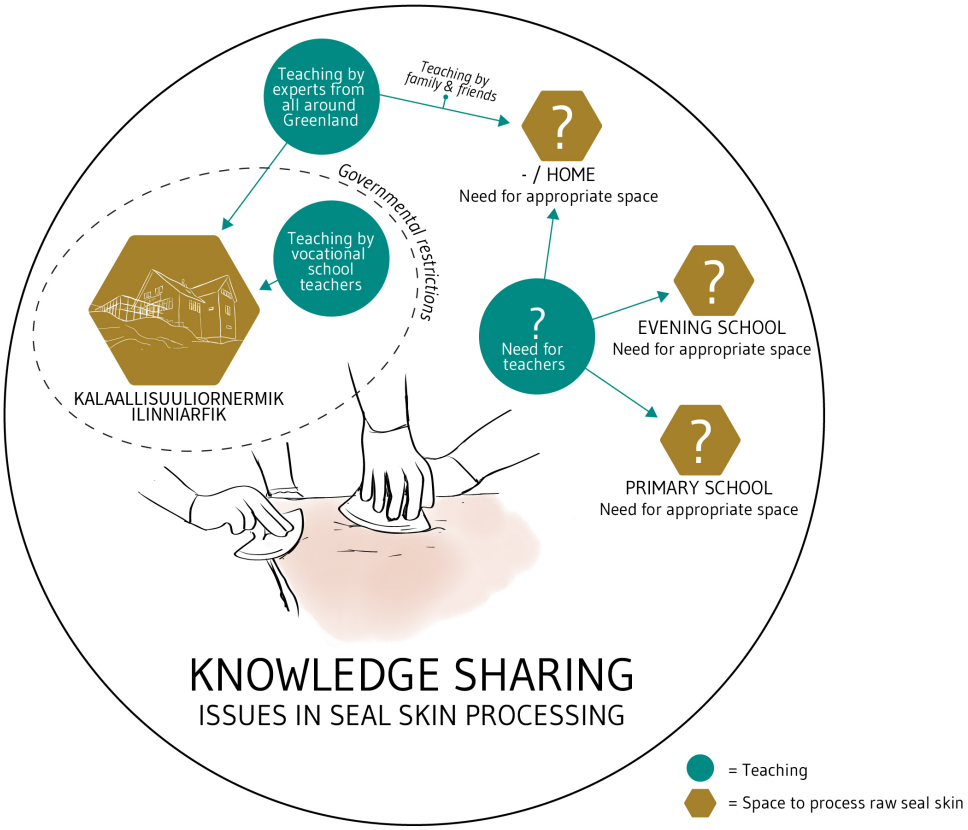

Figure 3. Need for teachers and appropriate space for raw seal skin processing.

language alone. On the one hand, there is a great need for educating Greenlandic professionals in trades that replace the imported workforce and would thus contribute to achieving a greater level of sovereignty and eventually full independence (Brincker and Lennert 2019). On the other hand, there is a great potential to restore and regenerate Inuit knowledge on the seal hunting culture by including some of it in the primary school curriculum. Thus, different ways of knowing in Greenland are in some ways competing with each other.

COLONIAL ORIGINS OF CURRENT ISSUES IN KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

Current issues in knowledge-sharing originate in colonialism and coloniality. A significant part of coloniality—that is, the colonisation of minds—is the hegemony of the knowledge of the colonisers. Coloniality introduces the idea that the only way to achieve power over one's own future is to learn the knowledge of the colonisers, ultimately leading to the replacement of local knowledge (Quijano 2007). In Greenland, knowledge of seal hunting was valued and valuable for Danes, even supported to a paternalistic extent (Marquardt 1999). Knowledge of seal skins, however, held less interest. Instead, colonial ideas for Greenlandic women's roles in society pointed their futures towards different directions. Susanne Dybbroe (1988) described how women were included—albeit selectively—in the development process, or, more precisely, the westernisation process. Women worked at fish factories and as housemaids, whilst they were denied access to

education and the political sphere, resulting in an economic and political power gap between genders. Educating Greenlandic men for service in the church, colonial trade, and administration began in 1830. Whilst this provided positions of economic and political power for the people of Greenland, it also created a Greenlandic elite along with economic, political, and gender inequalities amongst the Greenlandic Inuit. In the first half of the 1900s, the idea of educating women emerged, although the aims reflected those of Danish society. Thus, women were taught to become good housewives or housemaids. Other appropriate skills required for adapting to the imported material culture (including housing and European food) consisted of sewing fabric, which may have impacted the type of handicrafts subsequently practiced.

In 1953, Denmark addressed the decolonisation criteria in the Charter of the United Nations (1945) by making Greenland a province of Denmark. The promise of constitutional change reflected equality between the Greenlandic Inuit and the Danish. In practice, however, this initiated the strongest years of assimilation and significant Danish immigration (Dahl 1986; 2011). Multiple development projects aimed at achieving industrialisation, economic growth, and education, which were not entirely in conflict with the visions of all Greenlandic people. However, these changes were conducted on Danish terms, which included centralised politics resulting in the relocation of entire villages to cities. This period has been described as challenging for Greenlandic women, since they were expected to fulfil the roles of both Danish and Greenlandic society. As such, they attended to the labour force, alongside caring for their families and their households. Dybbroe's (1988: 126) description here sheds light on how assimilation politics and the restructuring of the economy affected the practice of women's knowledge in the seal hunting culture.

> Influenced by the cultural pressure inherent in the school program introduced in the 1950s and strengthened through the ideology of 'modernization' flaunted by G-60 [the economic policy in Greenland, 1966–1975], these women stopped teaching their daughters traditional women's crafts.

Although many of the changes introduced by Danes were paternalistic in nature, it would be similarly paternalistic to ignore the agency of the Inuit ancestors who actively participated in directing the future of Greenland either through collaboration with the Danes, through resistance, or through proactive decision-making. These included achieving autonomy through Home Rule in 1979 and the Self-Government Act in 2009. Notably, despite the assimilation efforts and changes in gender roles, the Greenlandic Inuit also did not become Danes. The gender inequality prevailing for centuries in the Greenlandic educational and political framework did not exclude the parallel presence of the Greenlandic Inuit understanding of gender as described by Karla Jessen Williamson (Pedersen and Paniula 2014). I argue that addressing the gender, class, and racial hierarchies in the foundation of governing structures is important in order to avoid replicating them at the structural level in the current administration. Yet, it is equally important to acknowledge the possibility that Inuit and Danish concepts of gender exist side by side.

RESPONDING TO THE THREE MAIN CHALLENGES

The *kalaallisuuliortut* participating in this research felt that decision-makers inadequately understand their work. Thus, there is a need for better communication and collaborative decision-making. Some decisions affecting the *kalaallisuuliortut* have been introduced without their consent. This includes, first, the repurposing and subsequent closure of *Natseq*, a Sisimiut-based factory that originally functioned as a place for processing seal skins and later aimed at producing *kalaallisuut*, but ultimately focused on making products from industrially tanned skins and muskox wool (according to interviews, although I was unable to access any official information on the factory). Some participants contacted the city and municipality about their wishes regarding space in which to practice *kalaallisuut*-making. One *kalaallisuuliortoq* I interviewed approached the mayor, delivering a letter to ask if the city could open a space where *kalaallisuuliortut* could practice their profession upon graduation. The response she received was a recommendation that she should become an entrepreneur. However, she would have had to raise the money and organise the place herself, which would have been too great of an economic risk for an individual. The *kalaallisuuliortut* also mentioned positive attempts made by governing bodies, such as providing courses on entrepreneurship. Whilst participants acknowledged the need for these courses, the courses were also criticised for primarily covering the work of a seamstress, which does not match the workload of *kalaallisuut*-making. Participants indicated a gap in communication between the *kalaallisuuliortut* and the governing bodies. Nevertheless, this article focuses only on the *kalaallisuuliortut* perspectives. Thus, further research is needed to understand the perspectives of the governing bodies.

ENVISIONING A SEAL CENTRE

All three challenges mentioned above could at least partially be addressed by establishing a communal space in which to work with seal skins (Figure 4). This idea arose during each interview and was further clarified during the workshop. In this article, I refer to this space as a seal centre, although it does not need to exclude the processing of other skins and all of the other steps in *kalaallisuut*-making. Nevertheless, the greatest need is for a place in which to process seal skins. Potential users of a seal centre could consist of the graduates of *Kalaallisuuliornermik Ilinniarfik* (Lange Larsen 2023; B. Lynge 2023; A. K. Lynge 2023; Ljungdahl 2023). For them, it would provide a space in which they might gain experience and confidence, potentially leading to launching their own companies, and a place to complete at least the messiest parts of seal skin processing. Ane Katrine noted during the workshop that the space could also be used for teaching children about *kalaallit* (Greenlandic) knowledge either as part of the school curriculum or as a hobby. Other potential users of a seal centre could include seal hunters and tourists. Cruise ship tourism is high in Sisimiut, and Vera Lange Larsen (2023) envisioned a seal centre working as a space in which to show people from other countries that seals are used in a sustainable way in Greenland. In addition, the potential benefits of a seal centre are versatile. Ultimately, this space could increase sharing and knowledge practice (B. Lynge 2023; Kleist 2023; Amondsen 2023), enable the *kalaallisuuliortut* to make a living from tanning and sewing (B. Lynge 2023; Ljungdahl 2023), connect the *kalaallisuuliortut* to one another in order to start a business

together (Ljungdahl 2023), and increase the use of seal skins (Amondsen 2023).

The need for and vision of a seal centre became so clear that a municipality representative was asked about the best practices to proceeding with it. They recommended the *kalaallisuuliortut* establish an association to facilitate communication with the municipality, which is somewhat similar to how carvers have organised themselves in Sisimiut since 1990 allowing them to secure a working place. Barse Svendsen (2023), the chairman of the carvers' association *Savituut*, explained that the association is beneficial when communicating with the city and municipality. Rent for the arts and crafts workshop is paid to the city using membership fees, allowing each carver a table at which to work and space to exhibit and sell their work. The association monitors who can work there, helping to maintain the level of carving in that space and ensuring that users follow the rules. This model could be inspirational for the *kalaallisuuliortut*, although the timespan of the production is so much longer that it may not be applicable as is. The *kalaallisuuliortut* participating in the workshop in June 2023 decided to meet up later to organise as an association. In November 2023, *KI* teachers invited the alumni to discuss the topic, resulting in the decision to establish an association.

FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

Establishing a seal centre requires significant support from the city, municipality, and/or the Greenlandic government. Yet, significant competition for public resources exists in Greenland and visions for independence favour high-profit economic endeavours. Following the implementation of Home Rule in 1979, the majority of matters regarding Greenland transferred from Copenhagen to Nuuk, and the Greenlandic Inuit successfully took responsibility for their education, along with economic, language, cultural, and social policies, and for wildlife management (Dahl 2001: 40). Whilst this was significant, transferring power to the hands of the Greenlandic people, the Home Rule—and later the Act on Greenland Self-Government (2009)—the government also inherited the economic burden of the modernisation project resulting in high living costs with disproportionate opportunities for income (Dahl 1986: 317, 321). This led to an economic dependency on aid from Denmark, which remains a major obstacle to achieving full independence (Kuokkanen 2017). The need to improve the national economy is clear, but on whose terms? Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2021: 313) has outlined the risks of relying solely on neoliberalism to pave the way for independence:

> Research shows that neoliberal, market-driven self-governance creates new forms of dependency and frequently widens socio-economic inequalities in Indigenous communities (…).

Here, Kuokkanen specifically referred to the risks surrounding collaboration with transnational mining corporations which might resemble a colonial relationship. However, the core message echoes the challenges of finding a balance between economic stability and Inuit values. Thus, in addition to questions regarding the costs of supporting *kalaallisuut*-making and the profits to Greenland and its people, I suggest considering its value by responding to questions related to what type of social, spiritual, and economic relationships it strengthens.

In contemporary Greenland, seals are primarily hunted for food. Approximately half of these seals' skins are sold to Great Greenland (Statistics Greenland 2024). Yet, the participants

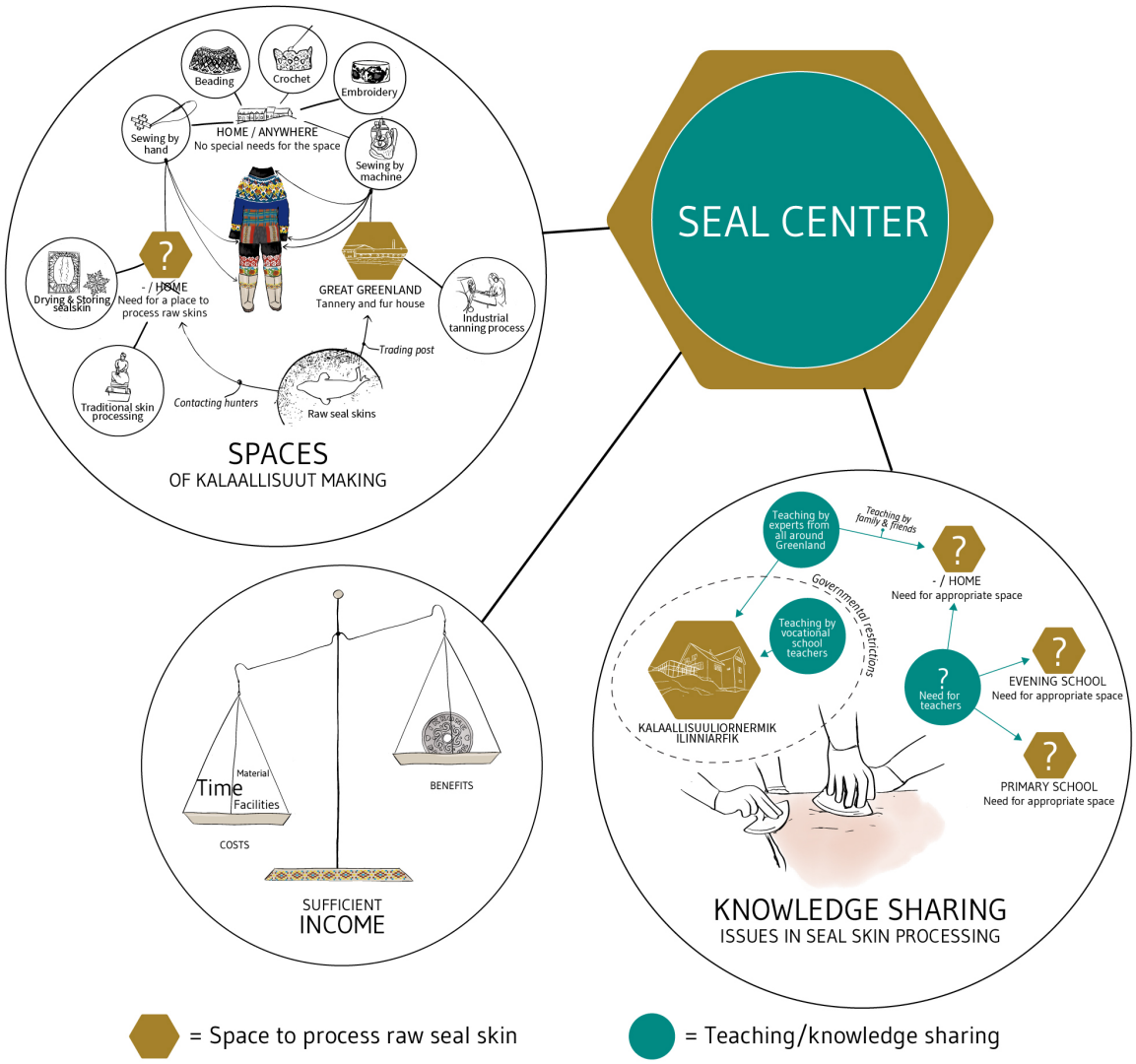

Figure 4. A seal centre responds to the need for an appropriate infrastructure and for knowledge-sharing.

in this study described industrial seal skin processing as not entirely capable of responding to the surplus of seal skins, nor does the trade network reach all of the villages. Some of the skins, therefore, are wasted unless traditional seal skin processing is still locally practiced. Perhaps because treating and sewing the skins has been women's responsibility, the *kalaallisuuliortut* participating in this research feel a responsibility for caring for the skins and finding a use for them, not only for the sake of respecting the skins and seals, but also to ensure that hunters can earn an income (Lange Larsen 2023). This points towards repairing the reciprocal relations between women's and men's tasks separated during the colonial process. While defining the importance of traditional skin processing and *kalaallisuut*-making skills for Greenlandic people lies beyond the scope of this article, it became clear in the interviews that such issues are of high importance for the identity of and value placed upon relationships with ancestors and other Inuit. Clearly, the value of women's knowledge in Greenlandic seal hunting culture

cannot be measured only in economic terms. Whilst efforts aimed at achieving economic independence are understandable, Pituaq (Kleist 2023) expressed her frustration with resource allocation in Greenland which primarily favours high-profit economic endeavours: 'Everything has to do with economy nowadays, so it's hard, you know. Whenever it has to do something with cultural events, cultural matters, it's very limited. Like, there are not very many resources [available]'. A seal centre may not be a high-profit business, but it has the potential to link *kalaallisuut*-making to the appropriate infrastructure, trade, and knowledge-sharing, thereby re-establishing the role of women as producers in seal hunting. Perhaps one of the challenges here is that the Danish governance model adopted in Greenland may inadequately recognise and respond to the multifaceted nature of the Inuit seal hunting culture (see Kuokkanen 2019). Much like seal hunting, processing seal skins can simultaneously be a cultural, economic, spiritual, social, recreational, and educational activity. Thus, it is challenging for a siloed administration to address it from an equally holistic perspective. A seal centre may not be significant only within each individual sector, but evaluating its importance at a holistic level could render it a game changer.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have discussed the state of West Greenlandic Inuit knowledge on processing seal skins using traditional methods. *Kalaallisuut*-making is considered one of the main reasons for the practice of such skills today, making it an inseparable part of the discussion of its future. Thus, I studied these skills within the context of a vocational school which teaches *kalaallisuut*-making. Empirical work with the *kalaallisuuliortut* revealed three main challenges or leverage points: a lack of appropriate space within which to process seal skins; insufficient compensation from the practice; and issues related to knowledge-sharing. Participants envisioned that establishing a seal centre would respond to all three points, although a seal centre would also require support from governing bodies. That said, further study amongst a larger group of stakeholders is necessary for planning the feasibility and functions of a seal centre.

Regarding the question of *kalaallisuuliortut* experiences related to practicing place-based knowledge within a web of regional, national, and global relations in contemporary Greenland, I argue that many of the challenges emerged from the governing bodies' inadequate understanding of the value and practice of place-based knowledge. Place-based knowledge often has the capacity to adapt to changes introduced from the level of governance. However, unless its value is understood in practitioners' terms, it will lack adequate support. For instance, given the tenuous understanding of the value of knowledge on *kalaallisuut*-making and the processing of seal skins during the colonial period, such knowledge was fading. Reviving that knowledge by establishing a vocational school is a sign of its adaptability to the new form the education system has taken. However, support from the administration associates *kalaallisuut*-making to work akin to that of a seamstress, suggesting that the practice and value of *kalaallisuut*-making does not unfold to governing bodies in the same way it unfolds amongst its practitioners. As previous research has shown (Ingold and Kurttila 2000; Konttinen 2024), if practitioners and governing bodies hold conflicting understandings of a tradition, the wrong relations are supported and limited. Thus, discussions on the value or benefits of the seal centre should not be limited to economic considerations, but should address all relations

embedded within the making and wearing of *kalaallisuut* and other skin-based clothing. Examples from across Inuit *nunaat*—that is, the Inuit homelands—confirm that engaging in tanning and sewing significantly and positively impact Inuit health (Emanuelsen et al. 2020), pride related to being *Inuk* (Jakobsen 2011), and connecting with ancestors, descendants, and other important relations including those between humans and other-than-humans (Greene and Zawadski 2022). In addition to the direct benefits, support for knowledge of seal skins has the potential to dismantle inequities in governance regarding gender and onto-epistemologies by restoring the value of women's labour within seal hunting culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to all of the research participants; to the University of Lapland, Research Council of Finland and the Finnish Cultural Foundation for funding this research; to Cecilie Berthelsen for excellent Greenlandic-English-Greenlandic interpretation and to Pernille Kristensen for article translation; to Sari Kokkola and Vanessa Fuller for English-language checking; to Jakku Bregnhøj (Arctic Hub) and Petra Falin for guiding me on ethical research practices; and to Monica Tennberg, Pirjo-Kristiina Virtanen, Hanna Guttorm, Sandra Wallenius-Korkalo, anonymous peer reviewers (3), and the journal editor Tuomas Tammisto for commenting on previous versions of this manuscript. I have finalized this article while working as a part of the research project Post-anthropocentric water relations in the Bothnian Bay (Research Council of Finland, grant number: 354885) led by PI Monica Tennberg.

NOTES

1 Making *kalaallisuut* relies on several methods, whereby English-language terms such as seamstress are too limited.

2 I agree with the criticism on the traditional–modern dichotomy. However, the participants chose to use the term *tradition* and I respect that in this paper (see Ingold and Kurttila 2000).

3 I aim to avoid creating dichotomies through my terminological choices on knowledge. I consider industrial seal skin tanning practiced by Great Greenland—and the governance practiced by the *Naalakkersuisut*—as based on Inuit knowledge. Thus, I use 'place-based (Inuit) knowledge' to emphasise the situationality and the local relations of *kalaallisuut*-making.

4 In describing *nuna*, Williamson (2011) agrees with Mark Nuttal's (1992) observations, stating that '*Nuna* is usually translated as "land", but it can also mean "total habitat", including the sea, the ice, the mountains, the air, the animals, fish, and even souls and memories of events and the people who lived in the past' (Williamson 2011: 23).

5 At the time of submitting this manuscript, the length of the school programme was two years. However, the Government of Greenland has agreed to extend the programme to three years (Teams video-call with Vera Lange Larsen, 13 October 2025).

REFERENCES

Arnfred, Signe and Kirsten Bransholm Pedersen 2015. From Female Shamans to Danish Housewives: Colonial Constructions of Gender in Greenland, 1721 to ca. 1970. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 23 (4): 282–302. https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2015.1094128

Bodenhorn, Barbara 1990. 'I'm Not the Great Hunter, My Wife Is': Iñupiat and Anthropological Models of Gender. Études/Inuit/Studies 14 (1/2): 55–74.

Brincker, Benedikte and Mîtdlârak Lennert 2019. Building a Nation in the Classroom: Exploring Education Policy in Post-Colonial Greenland. In Mhairi C. Beaton, Diane B. Hirshberg, Gregor R. Maxwell, and Jennifer Spratt (eds). *Including the*

North: A Comparative Study of the Policies on Inclusion and Equity in the Circumpolar North. Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopisto.

Dahl, Jens 1986. Greenland: Political Structure of Self-Government. *Arctic Anthropology* 23 (1/2): 315–324.

Dahl, Jens 2000. *Saqqaq: An Inuit Hunting Community in the Modern World*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442679573

Dahl, Jens 2001. Self-Government in Greenland. *Indigenous Affairs* 3: 36–41.

Dahl, Jens 2011. Phasing Out the Colonial Status of Greenland, 1945–54: A Historical Study, by Eric Beukel, Frede P. Jensen and Jens Elo Rytter. Book review. *Arctic* 64 (2): 251–252. https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic4104

Dowsley, Martha 2015. Identity and the Evolving Relationship between Inuit Women and the Land in the Eastern Canadian Arctic. *Polar Record* 51 (5): 536–549. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247414000564

Dybbroe, Susanne 1988. Participation and Control: Issues in the Debate on Women and Development - A Greenlandic Example. *Folk* 30: 111–132.

Dyrendom Graugaard, Naja 2020. *Tracing Seal - Unsettling Narratives of Kalaallit Seal Relations*. PhD thesis. Aalborg: Aalborg University. https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/549491436/PHD_Naja_Dyrendom_Graugaard_E_pdf.pdf <Accessed 26 November 2025>

Emanuelsen, Kristin, Tristan Pearce, Jill Oakes, Sherilee L. Harper and James D. Ford 2020. Sewing and Inuit Women's Health in the Canadian Arctic. *Social Science & Medicine* 265: 113523. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113523

Fienup-Riordan, Ann 2007. *Yuungnaqpiallerput/ The Way We Genuinely Live: Masterworks of Yup'ik Science and Survival*. Seattle and Anchorage: University of Washington Press in association with Anchorage Museum of History and Art and Calista Elders Council.

Flora, Janne, Kirsten Hastrup and Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen 2021. Keeping Busy in Savissivik: Women and Work in Northwest Greenland. In Pamela Stern (ed). *The Inuit World*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429275470-18

Government of Greenland 2022. *Research – the Road to Progress. Greenland's National Research Strategy 2022–2030*. Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports and Church, December 2022. https://nis.gl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/english-book.pdf <Accessed 8 November 2025>

Greene, Ezra Anton and Krista Ulujuk Zawadski 2022. More than Needle and Thread: Inuit Knowledge Sharing and Well-Being through Community-Based Programs. *American Review of Canadian Studies* 52 (3): 277–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2022.2103335

Hermkens, Anna-Karina and Katherine Lepani 2017. Introduction: Revaluing Women's Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific. In Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (eds). *Sinuous Objects*. Acton, ACT: ANU Press. https://doi.org/10.22459/SO.08.2017

Ingold, Tim and Terhi Kurttila 2000. Perceiving the Environment in Finnish Lapland. *Body & Society* 6 (3–4): 183–196. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X00006003010

Inuit Circumpolar Council 2021. *Ethical and Equitable Engagement Synthesis Report: A Collection of Inuit Rules, Guidelines, Protocols, and Values for the Engagement of Inuit Communities and Indigenous Knowledge from Across Inuit Nunaat*. (Synthesis Report). International. https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/project/icc-ethical-and-equitable-engagement-synthesis-report/ <Accessed 8 November 2025>

Issenman, Betty Kobayashi 2014. *Sinews of Survival: The Living Legacy of Inuit Clothing*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Jakobsen, Aviâja Rosing 2011. Kalaallisuut — Den Grønlandske Nationaldragt — Som Grønlandsk Identitetsmarkør. In Ole Høiris and Ole Marquardt (eds). Fra vild til verdensborger: Grønlandsk identitet fra kolonitiden til nutidens globalitet. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.608274.12

Konttinen, Heidi 2024. Dwelling in Ice: A Relational Approach to the Finnish Seal-Hunting Tradition on the Bothnian Bay. *Arctic Anthropology* 59 (2): 193–211. https://doi.org/10.3368/aa.59.2.193

Kovach, Margaret 2009. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Kuokkanen, Rauna 2017. 'To See What State We Are In': First Years of the Greenland Self-Government Act and the Pursuit of Inuit Sovereignty. *Ethnopolitics* 16 (2): 179–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1074393

Kuokkanen, Rauna 2019. *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190913281.001.0001

Kuokkanen, Rauna 2021. Indigenous Westphalian Sovereignty? Decolonization, Secession, and Indigenous Rights in Greenland. In Pamela Stern (ed). *The Inuit World*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429275470

Marquardt, Ole 1999. An Introduction to Colonial Greenland's Economic History. In Ole Marquardt, Paul Holm, and David J. Starkey (eds). *From Sealing to Fishing: Social and Economic Change in Greenland, 1850–1940*. Fiskeri- og Søfartsmuseets studieserie, no. 14, Studia Atlantica, no. 4, Fiskeri- og Søfartsmuseet, Esbjerg.

Mies, Maria 2014 [1986]. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350221703

Nuttall, Mark 1992. *Arctic Homeland: Kinship, Community and Development in Northwest Greenland*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Nymand Larsen, Joan and Gail Fondahl 2014. Major Findings and Emerging Trends in Arctic Human Development. In *Arctic Human Development Report: Regional Processes and Global Linkages*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers. https://doi.org/10.6027/tn2014-567

Oakes, Jill, Rick Riewe, Saeko Usukawa and Frank Kazmerowich 1995. *Our Boots: An Inuit Women's Art*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.

Pearce, Tristan D. and Kristin Emanuelsen 2021. "I Don't Even Sew for Myself Anymore": The Role of Sewing in a Northern Inuit Economy. In Pamela Stern (ed). *The Inuit World*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429275470-19

Pedersen, Kirsten Bransholm and Najaaraq Paniula 2014. De grønlandske kvindeorganisationers rolle i den politiske udviklingsproces - set i et postkolonialt perspektiv. *Dansk sociologi* 25 (4): 94–121. https://doi.org/10.22439/dansoc.v25i4.4988

Quijano, Aníbal 2007. Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21 (2): 168–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353

Quintal-Marineau, Magalie 2017. The New Work Regime in Nunavut: A Gender Perspective. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes* 61 (3): 334–345. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12387

Rossen, Rosannguaq 2020. *Branding Igennem Moden: - Den Vestgrønlandske Kvindedragt Som Symbol*. PhD thesis. Nuuk: Grønlands Universitet.

Sejersen, Frank 2022. Moral Economy. In Marjo Lindroth, Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen, and Monica Tennberg (eds). *Critical Studies of the Arctic*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11120-4_9

Statistics Greenland 2024. *Greenland in Figures 2024*. Nuuk: Nuuk Offset. https://stat.gl/publ/en/GF/2024/pdf/Greenland%20in%20Figures%202024.pdf <Accessed 8 November 2025>

The Act on Greenland Self-Government 2009. Act no. 473, enacted 21.6.2009.

United Nations 1945. *Charter of the United Nations*, Chapter XI, enacted 24.10.1945.

Wenzel, George 2000 [1991]. *Animal Rights, Human Rights, Ecology, Economy and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Williamson, Karla Jessen 2011. *Inherit My Heaven: Kalaallit Gender Relations*. Nuuk: Government of Greenland.

Wilson, Shawn 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Black Point; Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

Amondsen, Sofia 2023. Interview, Microsoft Teams video call 30.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Anonymous 2023. Interview, Greenland 5.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) and Cecilie Berthelsen (interpreter). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Berthelsen, Kirstine 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 17.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) and Cecilie Berthelsen (interpreter). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Kleist, Pituaq Maria 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 23.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Lange Larsen, Vera 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 3.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Ljungdahl, Olga 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 24.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) and Cecilie Berthelsen (interpreter). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Lynge, Ane Katrine 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 16.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) and Cecilie Berthelsen (interpreter). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Lynge, Birgithe 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 15.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) and Cecilie Berthelsen (interpreter). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

Svendsen, Barse 2023. Interview, Sisimiut, Greenland 18.5.2023. Heidi Konttinen (interviewer) and Cecilie Berthelsen (interpreter). Arctic seal hunting as a place of encounter for local and global approaches to sustainability, University of Lapland.

HEIDI KONTTINEN
DOCTORAL RESEARCHER
CRITICAL ARCTIC STUDIES
ARCTIC CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND
heidi.konttinen@ulapland.fi