

In ice and skin: Inuit kakiniit birth, death, and revival in a modern post-colonial and politicized arctic

by Maya Abdulhak

This paper delves into the profound history of traditional Inuit tattooing practices known as *kakiniit* against the backdrop of a post-colonial and highly politicized Arctic landscape. The story of the birth, death, and revival of *kakiniit* is amidst many traces of Indigenous resilience and transformation following rapid socio-cultural changes within communities during assimilatory efforts. Highlighting the narrative perspectives surrounding the birth of *kakiniit*, this paper serves the history of the artistic storytelling model and form of cultural expression through Inuit cosmologies and ontologies and revisits sites of its cultural preservation and revitalization, interrogating lingering assimilatory perspectives within the Arctic wherein colonial impositions intersect with Indigenous agency. Through the study of ethnographic narratives across age groups and geographies and engagement with contemporary resurgence efforts, this essay illuminates the deep-rooted complexity and dynamic adaptation of *kakiniit* throughout the ages, navigating its creation, temporary expulsion from Inuit culture and its revival and repurposing as a widely used historical recognition and cultural reclamation practice across Indigenous cultures in the Arctic as an adaptive expression of cultural continuity and resistance in the face of ongoing colonialist ideals.



Figure 1. Cora Kavyatok, Little Inuk Photography, Photograph, 2017.¹

Maya Abdulhak is an Undergraduate Student at the University of Alberta (Department of Psychology and Anthropology, P217 Biological Sciences Building, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2E9 [mabdulha@ualberta.ca]).

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The oldest account of tattoos in Arctic folklore is the story of the raven and the loon. The oral legend varies across Arctic regions, but all converge into a principal point: in Inuit culture, tattooing is a tradition as timeless as nature itself. In the Netsilik region in Nunavit, the raven, born white, and the loon – otherwise known through multiple retellings as Nuliayuk or Nálungiaq but is most known as Sedna, the sea goddess – fell in love and decided to tattoo one another. The raven tattoos the loon (Sedna) first, creating the pattern present in the plumage of loons today. The raven is then said to grow angry for unknown reasons and throws ashes across the loon's back, permanently staining it black. The loon retaliates by scraping soot from the bottom of a cooking pot, covering the raven with it in retaliation, and staining its body black. The raven, rageful from the loon's actions, whips up the seas after the loon tries to escape.

In the Repulse Bay variant of the legend, the raven finishes tattooing the loon without issue, but once they switch, the raven feels the pain of the needle and is unable to sit still. Having quickly grown impatient, the loon dumps the ink pot onto the raven, staining it permanently black before fleeing, but not before the raven throws the empty ink pot at the loon, severely injuring its legs (Jelinski 2015). This is where retellings of the legend converge with the most famous detail of the legend of Sedna, wherein her father blames her for the violent sea storm caused by the raven. Her father then throws her overboard their kayak when trying to escape. As Sedna clings to the side of the boat, her father cuts off her fingertips, knuckles, and hands, which fall into the ocean and become seals, whales, and other mammals (Allford 2019).

While the stories vary in terms of detail, they all allude to the significance of tattooing in Inuit culture, how the raven and the loon owe their appearances to the ink they were marked with.

This alludes to the ancient depths to which tattooing is embedded within Inuit understandings of nature and tradition. The long-lived presence of tattoos in Inuit culture is rooted in the same age in which the seals and fish that sustained the hunters were created at the bottom of the Arctic Sea by Sedna's hands, whose gift is honored through *kakiniit* (bPō^c), the ancient Inuit tattooing practice.

The following ages bring a significant loss of Inuit cultural vitality, including *kakiniit* practices, through colonization and assimilation. The disruption of Inuit cultural practices by colonization led to mass cultural suppression and erosion through societal attitude shifting and stigmatization of cultural practices. This led to the temporary death of *kakiniit*. After a culturally and spiritually void generation in which colonization caused the Inuit to believe that traditional practices were shameful, *kakiniit* revitalization efforts began to rise following the last generation victimized by residential schools, significantly so after the death of the last Inuk woman in the Nunavut area with tattoos done the traditional way, Mary Tallu in 2005, the release of the documentary Tunnitt: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos (Arnaquq-Baril 2011), and the Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project in 2016. This window of time ignited significant revitalization and reclamation efforts within

Inuit communities, which inspired many to readapt *kakiniit* practices taken from Inuit cultures. Following the revitalization and reconnection to spiritual and cultural roots, the reclamation of *kakiniit* also asserts Indigenous sovereignty in the Arctic, a demonstration of Inuit autonomy and cultural resurgence in a globally politicized area.

Following the trajectory of *kakiniit* in the Arctic, historical and contemporary accounts

manifest the existence of this practice that has been embedded within Inuit culture since time immemorial and follows its resurgence after its temporary disappearance, along with its regeneration to become an organized assertion across the Arctic. This paper narrates this trajectory through documented accounts and recounts the birth, death, and revitalization of Inuit kakiniit culture and its role in Arctic Indigenous movements of resisting colonial legacies and establishing cultural autonomy in a globally politicized Arctic.

Methodology

To gain a complete picture of how kakiniit exists in its pre-colonial and post-colonial forms, I collected my data directly from Indigenous narratives. The documentaries I chose are all directed by or star Indigenous peoples to behold a first-hand perspective of the culture. Articles I refer include first-hand commentaries and narratives, including Jacobsen’s work as a traditional kakiniit artist from Qeqertarsuaq, Greenland. The political justice regarding kakiniit must be defined through an Indigenous-led perspective, as the matter is closely related to the Inuit’s political and social autonomy in the Arctic. The political sources cited are consistent with UNDRIP’s call for Indigenous rights to include “the right to be free from discrimination,” “the right to fully participate in fair decision-making processes,” “the right to self-determination,” and “the right to maintain cultural traditions” (Coggins 2021). A defining factor of Indigenous storytelling is the oral artform, which is hearing history through word of mouth from ancestor to ancestor. In modern times, the artform has adapted to give the world a direct view from ancestors to viewers everywhere. As Indigenous history is retold through oral means (since very few Indigenous

languages have a written form), the best way to mitigate any biases or misinformation in studying and learning about kakiniit and any Indigenous histories is to learn directly from Indigenous cultures and narratives.

Birth

The long-term presence of tattooing in Inuit culture is noted in oral histories across the circumpolar north regions. For instance, the story of the raven and the loon demonstrates how intimately kakiniit is embedded within Inuit concepts of identity. However, the evidence of tattoos in the Arctic regions spans much further back. The Paleo-Eskimo Dorset culture dates from 1700 BC, and evidence of tattooing from this era was found in a tiny Dorset mask carved into a walrus tusk in Devon Island, Nunavut. The mask’s carved facial designs resemble the patterns used in kakiniit centuries later by Inuit women, which include intricate lines along the forehead, chin, and cheekbones.

The practice of kakiniit historically spanned modern-day Northern Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, and Greenland. According to the Repulse Bay variant of the legend from central Nunavut (Jelinski 2015), the argument between the raven and loon is why ravens are now black, and loons cannot walk. The notion of a story revolved around tattooing shaping an animal’s genealogy represents the practice being as integral to Inuit culture as the structure of nature and its animals today. In every version of the legend, Sedna sinks to the bottom of the sea and is worshipped by the hunters and honored by the women, dependent on her goodwill to supply food and sealskin. Referencing the legend, women across Arctic regions tattoo patterns on their fingers, knuckles, and wrists, representing a tribute to Sedna by marking where her hands were severed to create

the animals of the sea that sustained Inuit communities.

Kakiniit was historically done with caribou sinew as thread and finely sharpened bone as a needle. Artists used a mix of soot or tar, seal fat, and urine melted into oil over a qulliq, a traditional oil lamp, to make the ink. The process consisted of a skin-stitching method. While modern-day tattoos are done with a hand-poking method that injects ink into the skin one dot at a time with a metal needle, skin-stitching is done where caribou sinew is woven into a thread and soaked into the homemade ink and then sewn into the skin with the use of the bone needle, leaving the ink sewn under the skin. Another skin-stitching method used is the bone needle poking holes into the skin and then following with another ink-covered bone needle to embed the soot into the holes, leaving the skin to heal and close with the ink embedded inside. The process is precise and intricate and done only by women who are expert weavers, which facilitates the precision of stitching ink through the skin (Krutak 2012). Modern explanations describe kakiniit as representing Inuit women specifically, with an intimate connection to Sedna and the spiritual connection between death, creation, and femininity (Szabo 2021). Men could be tattooed, but the ink served the purpose of an aesthetic amulet, occasionally a representation of his tribe or region, a successful hunt, or done as a cleansing and retribution ritual following if a taboo had been broken, such as a failed hunt wherein game escaped, or the hunter wounded the game and made the animal experience suffering before death. Inuit culture firmly believes in respect and care towards all animals of the earth, including game – this translates to a traditional rule of ensuring animals do not suffer or suffer as little as possible when hunted for food (Hansen 2022). The purpose of kakiniit carried various

significances, representing rites of passage and personal identities, and documenting an individual's accomplishments and life stages.

The kakiniit done on a woman's fingertips, knuckles, and wrists represent where Sedna's hands were severed, done in respect and honor of the sea goddess and homage to the creation of the sea animals that sustained Inuit culture. Variations of designs and symbols within this kakiniit were based on region and aesthetic preference. Still, the markings were always done on the fingers and wrists to praise the nuanced accounts of the stories behind the first tattoos done by the raven and the loon. These stories, ranging across all Arctic regions, notably from across Eastern and Centre Nunavut to Greenland and Alaska, are all similar in respect to Sedna's ultimate death and the creation of the mammals from her fingers. The finger kakiniit are also known as '*Sassuma Arnaa*,' translated directly as 'Mother of the Sea,' another name for Sedna in the Kalaallisut dialect of the Inuit in West Greenland (Ennet 2021).

Face kakiniit are specifically called *tunniit kakiniit* (ᐅᐱᐅᐅ) and were done as identifiers of a woman's life journey, as well as skills and values within Inuit communities. The word '*Tunit*' is an Inuit reference from remnants of the Dorset culture, rooted in the Thule period around 1000 A.D. Along with the linguistic properties transferring over into modern cultures, there was physical evidence of tattooing existing before established Inuit cultures, such as the remnants of a Dorsal mask that was found to have markings akin to that of ancient preserved Greenlandic mummies from Qilakitsoq, an important archaeological site in Greenland (Jacobsen 2019). The Inuit people called the Dorset people of the past '*Tunit*' and adopted the word to refer to the face markings that the two cultures share. The V-shaped tattoo with the downward point on the

forehead is a mark of womanhood and the end of childhood, and it was often one of the first tattoos received by an Inuk woman, noting the milestone of starting her first period. In Inuktitut, the tattoo is called *signiq*, which also means ‘sun,’ referencing the East Greenlandic legend of how the sun and moon were created:

Aningaaq lived in a *sammisulik* where many families gathered for the winter, and so did his sister Maliina. Each night, when the lamps were turned down and the house filled with darkness, Aningaaq would find his sister and lay with her. Maliina, not knowing who the young man who slept with her every night was, began to wonder. In order to find out, she made her hands black with soot from the lamp. As usual, Aningaaq came to her and this time Maliina touched his shoulders with her blackened hands. The next morning, as the lamps were lit, Maliina said out loud, “Someone is here with soot on his shoulders.” She looked around and saw the sooty shoulders of her own brother. Maliina grabbed her ulu and cut off one of her breasts, threw it at her brother and said, “Since you desire me so much you should eat me.” Maliina took the burning moss from the lamp and ran out of the house and into the sky. Aningaaq followed her outside and saw her in the sky. He took his *sermiaat* and stuck it into the burning moss from another lamp and ran after his sister up into the sky. His strong legs caused him to run too fast and the fire on his *sermiaat* went out, leaving a glowing ember. Aningaaq blew on it and made many sparks that turned into the stars. Aningaaq’s fire went out. With only a cold glow left, he became the moon. Maliina is the warm burning sun because her fire still burns. Aningaaq, still filled with lust and

desire for his sister, follows her in the sky. (Jacobsen 2019: 1)

The forehead markings of East Greenlandic women are dedicated to Maalina, the symbol of melancholy and women who overcome bad situations, giving off warmth and light even in hardship (Jacobsen 2019).

However, *tunniit kakiniit* are widespread across all Inuit communities, with meanings and milestones represented differently. In other parts of the Arctic, the first tattoo received by an Inuk woman that marked the milestone of her first period was a precise line from the lip to the chin that signifies childhood’s end and the beginning of womanhood, known as *tavlugun* or *talloqut* (O’Bomsawin 2023). A *talloqut* was also done in regions where it was believed that a woman’s period blood would cause bad luck for hunts, so the tattoo was done as a cleansing ritual. In this case, *tunniit kakiniit* were done to please the spirit of the sun, *Lumiuk*, from the legend of the blind boy and the loon (Arnaquq-Baril 2011).

Iri’ tattoos, from the corners of the eyes to the hairline, are done in the belief that it would sharpen a woman’s vision for better hunting and, in different regions, to see better through snowstorms and at night.

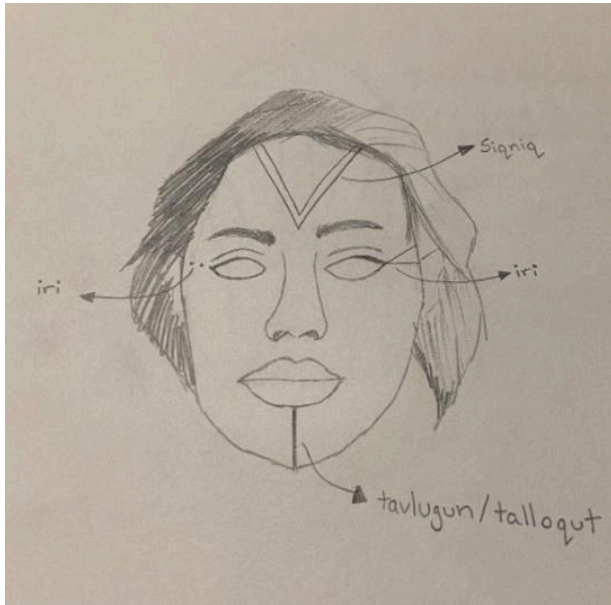


Figure 2. Maya Abdulhak, Composite sketch of traditional tunniit kakiniit, 2024.

Pregnant Inuk women would get their thighs tattooed to prepare themselves for childbirth and to have the newborn be greeted with something beautiful to see when it first enters the world. The kakiniit around the thighs would prepare the baby to enter the world in the spirit of beauty and knowledge, greeted with the marks of their culture in good faith.

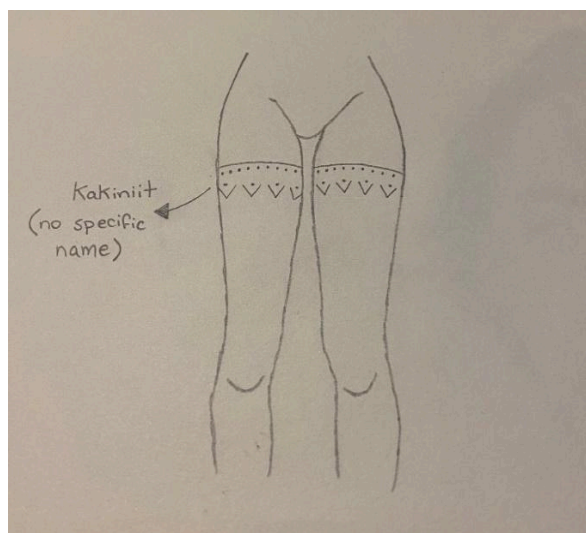


Figure 3. Maya Abdulhak, Composite sketch of traditional thigh kakiniit, 2024.

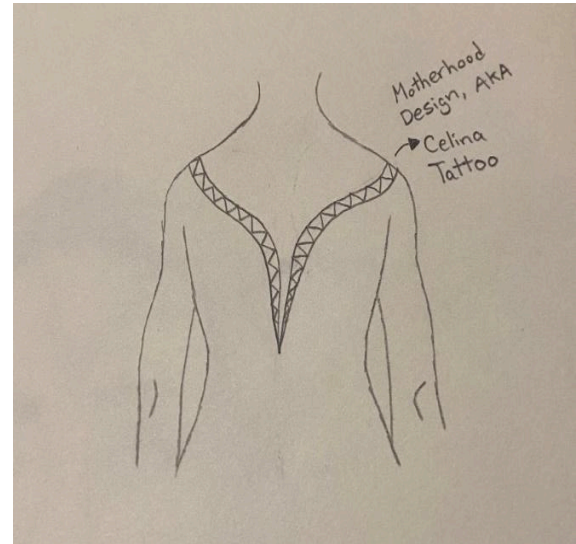


Figure 4. Maya Abdulhak, Composite sketch of amauti kakiniit, AKA the Motherhood Design, AKA Celina Tattoo, 2024.

Kakiniit around the chest, shoulders, and back represent the markings of an *amauti*, a parka worn specifically to carry babies, done only on the skin of mothers. The amauti symbolizes motherhood within Inuit cultures, and the kakiniit resembling one captures the intimate sense of a mother's all-encompassing care, resembling the rounded curves of the amauti along a mother's back and shoulders. This kakiniit is specifically noted as the motherhood design and is also known as the 'Celina Tattoo,' after renowned Canadian Inuk artist and musician Celina Kalluk, who modernized the design from an amauti's shape and stitching (Gaul 2014).

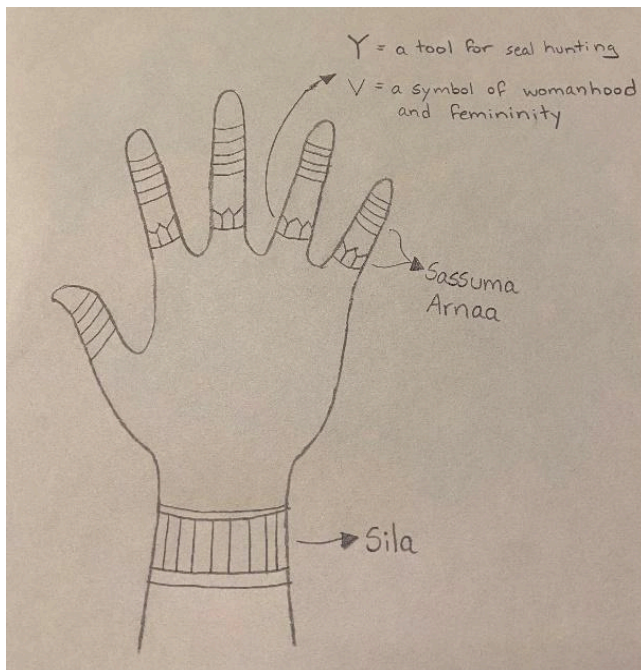


Figure 5. Maya Abdulhak, Composite sketch of traditional hand kakiniit, 2024.

Traditional Inuit tattoos in Greenlandic regions include *Sila* (ᓂᓴ), resembling train tracks around the wrist representing Inuit spiritual conceptualizations of ‘sky,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘breath,’ and ‘universe.’ *Sila* is also the name of the visible mortal world in Inuit theology, its counterpart being *Silam Aappaa*, the spirit realm. *Sila* tattoos contributed to keeping the sensitive balance between *Sila* and *Silam Aappaa*, a spiritual responsibility to keep the mortal spirits pleased (Jacobsen 2024).

One significant tattoo men would receive is the *kigjugaq*, a tattoo between one’s eyes. This tattoo is understood variably across anthropological interpretations, but the two most widely accepted meanings include Tulimaaq Aupilaarjuk’s interpretation, which was said to help keep men safe on the hunt (Jelinski 2015), and Lucassie Nutaraaluk’s interpretation, specifying it as a display that they had killed a human or an *ijaraq*, a human-like spirit (Groarke 2009).

Skills represented through kakiniit traditionally include a woman creating her first pair of *pualuuk* mitts, sealskin boots, and first parka, all accomplishments represented through the inked symbols. The design resembling the letter “Y” within kakiniit designs symbolizes a tool for seal hunting, and the design similar to the letter “V” represents womanhood and femininity (Allford 2019). Other symbols include dashes and dots along the cheeks (*iqsraq*), which held varying meanings relevant to one’s tribe or region, such as protecting communities from vengeful spirits (Jacobsen 2019).

Kakiniit also represents familial and social ties to status or tribes and is done as a rite of passage, like initiation within adoptive families. Inuit frequently faced starvation, and orphans within hungry families would often feel excluded and not as related to the mother and father of the family compared to the blood children. Kakiniit ensured that the orphan was no longer seen as an outsider but instead as a beautiful girl who was strong enough to endure the “toe-curling” pain of tattooing, signifying her place within the family as she dons the markings of her peers and community (Arnaquq-Baril 2011).

Kakiniit has significant spiritual roots within Inuit cultures, acting as a personal identifier in the afterlife and a rite of passage done to ensure the swaying of a final judgment. Danish-Inuk anthropologist Knud Rasmussen describes three places in which Inuit can go after death: (1) A land of pleasure up in the sky known as “the village of Eternal Homecoming”; (2) Noqurmiut, “the Land of the Crestfallen” under the earth’s surface where heads were hung upside down with smoke bellowing from their throats for eternity; (3) Aglermiut, the underworld beyond Noqurmiut in which “one experiences nothing but joy, prosperity, and abundance” (Rasmussen 2018). It is said that judgement would pass unto women without tattoos, and they would be banished to a

hellish-like afterlife where their heads are hung upside down with smoke bellowing out of their throats. Another depiction of Noqurmiut is noted in Rasmussen's *Den store slæderejse*; the passage describing the Inuit underworld is as follows:

Right under the crust of the earth lives the Noqumiut or "Land of the Crestfallen." Here men who were bad hunters, and women with no tattoos dwell. They always hang with their heads, and their chin is tucked down to their chests. They are always hungry, since they only live on butterflies; they always squat stooping and with closed eyes. Only when a butterfly flies above them, they lift their head slowly and snap after it, like nestlings after a fly. At the same moment smoke comes from their throat like puffballs exploding. (Jelinski 2015: 92-93)

Across regions, there were variants of whether the spirits of nature or Sedna herself were passing judgement in the afterlife. Near Taloyoak, Nunavut, growing girls were told that the sea goddess would deny access to the afterlife to women whose fingers were not tattooed with *sassuma aana* (see Gaul 2014), and women without kakiniit were banished to Noqurmiut as well (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). Women with tattoos are granted access to the village of Eternal Homecoming or *Aglermiut* on no specified definitive basis between the two. In another interpretation, artist Germaine Arnaktauyok referenced Rasmussen's orally translated depiction of the afterlife told to him by Arnarulunguaq, a Greenlandic-Inuit artist, who collaborated with Rasmussen on his expedition across the Netsilik territory of King William Island and provided her artistic and philosophical depictions of kakiniit in Rasmussen's book, *The Netsilik Eskimos*. Arnaktauyok's interpretation of divine judgment after death was stated as:

According to things I have read about tattooing if you had beautiful tattoos and you died; you were allowed into the afterlife. There was a woman who had an igloo up there. If you were tattooed and you died, you had to pass her entrance. She would look at you and if you had a tattoo she would smile at you and you passed by... (Jelinski 2015: 57)

There is no definitive reasoning for whether the woman in the igloo is a divine interpretation of Sedna, or another deity within Inuit spirituality. In other interpretations from the Kuujuaq and Quaqtaq areas in Nunavik, it is understood that in the afterlife, one would meet their family and look at their tattoos to recognize them (O'Bomsawin 2023). One without tattoos would not be recognized and, instead, be left to wander the empty afterlife alone.

Along with its interpersonal, social, and spiritual representations, kakiniit is used as an aesthetic medium for Inuit women. Across the Arctic regions, it was said that one was not a real woman until she had tattoos, which is equal to the saying that one cannot get married before one knows how to build an igloo. Kakiniit was described as making a woman beautiful by enhancing her features and making her look pretty, which made the pain of the process worthwhile. Depictions of an untattooed woman would describe her face as "looking like a swollen gland" and looking like a man in a statement by Felix Kupak, who said, "If there were a couple in bed and there was one without tattoos, it was like seeing two men in bed together" (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). All ink was embedded with an understood purpose, as one could look at a woman and immediately identify region of origin, achievements, and roles within the community.

Death

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whaling and fur trading brought Inuit into intermittent contact with European settlers, and the groups began engaging in trade, which provided the Inuit access to tools and goods, including rifles, fabrics, tea, and tobacco. From oral accounts of history, the European traders did not concern themselves with how the Inuit lived their lives. The Christian missionaries, however, were a significantly different story. Ministers traveled through Pond Inlet, Pangnirtung, and then arrived in Baffin Island. Reverend Edmund Peck, one of the first missionaries to arrive to Baffin Island, was instrumental in forcing the Inuit to relinquish their culture, and his name is remembered across the region today as the one who caused the Inuit on Baffin Island to forget traditional cultural practices (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). Peck arrived with an advantage – he spoke Inuktitut, having learned the language on the Hudson Bay. The Inuit gave him the name “*Uqammak*,” which means the one who speaks well. He brought with him the syllabic writing system and ensured his education of Inuktitut to better adapt to the rapid spread of Christianity to Inuit populations. Peck built the first Anglican church on Baffin Island in 1894 and produced copies of the Bible, sending them to explorer and whaling ships to promote the eradication of traditional Inuit practices. He argued vigorously against shamanistic practices, including kakiniit. Tattoos within this native community were seen as marks of primitivism and degeneration and as identifiers of pre-Christian contact within Inuit communities. The tradition threatened the missionary’s messages on behalf of the church and must be eradicated for the Inuit to be ‘Christianized’ and, thus, ‘civilized,’ with missionaries being tasked with converting Inuit communities and forbidding kakiniit in the

process. Tunniit kakiniit, the elaborate permanent markings on one’s face, were the most visible and enduring symbols of pre-Christian Inuit life and, therefore, outlawed.

From the nineteenth century onward, this suppression grew rapid and intense across Inuit communities, with Euro-Christian missionaries establishing settlements and residencies in the Arctic, resulting in significant socio-cultural erasure, which further developed into genocide. The churches gained mass influence within Inuit communities by implementing local residential schools, wherein children aged five to six were taught a culture and value system different from their parent culture. The implementation of residential schools created a mass generational rift, with generations of assimilated Inuit children brought up into a mass legacy of colonialism. Traditional Inuit practices were not forgotten but stigmatized, framed in taboo and shame, and made to be buried in the past as “primitive.” Colonization forced Inuit elders into Christian or Catholic upbringings, which taught them to be ashamed of kakiniit. There was a potent force of Christianity within the elder Inuit communities, which caused tension around discussing any spiritual beliefs that predate the mass Christian assimilation within elders. Residential schools and forced assimilation taught the ‘lost generation’ shame around their historic culture, which lasts today. Inuit children being forced to abandon their oral languages in residential schools resulted in the loss of language and storytelling within these generations, as Indigenous Arctic languages had no written medium, which further resulted in the disruption of transmitting kakiniit culture. There was significant social shaming of traditional Inuit practices, as the Catholic Church banned them due to their origin outside of Christianity, which led to the tattooing practice being called ‘evil.’ A retelling of kakiniit secretly being done in

residential schools as an act of defiance is told within the book *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Haig-Brown 1988), wherein a brief narrative is provided by a residential school alumna about her friend's fatal experience with tattooing in the school:

Tattooing your hands [was common]. And she done that, she used a common pin or needle [...] and wrote her initials on her hand and then it got blood poisoning from the ink. Like her hand was swelling and swelling. Two or three days later [...] she started getting a fever. So, she showed the nun and they just sent her to bed. And when she must have been in bed about two days [...] she was getting so she wasn't even herself [...] and she just lay in bed and two days later, she died. (Haig-Brown 1988: 116)

A significant shaming factor of kakiniit within the lost generation includes the forced tattooing rituals within residential schools, a brutal historical trauma that tore away the intimate meanings behind the tattoos. Being forcibly tattooed turned the practice into a form of torture that tainted the vision of tattooing within Inuit communities as something to be feared and hated. A narrative of this forced tattooing by Fort Wingate Indian School alumna Grandma Trinnie is retold in a scholarly article by Martine Michelle Dawley and is described as:

'The big girls' at boarding school would catch the younger girls, newer students to the boarding school – and force some tattoos on them. [...] Her tattoos were part of a hazing ritual for the younger students entering boarding school, which could be viewed as a form of historical trauma. [...] Grandma Trinnie did not have [...] the freedom to

tattoo with her peers; instead, she was forced into an act that was not her own. (Dawley 2020: 297)

The residential schools' assimilation and lack of cultural competency policies was the foundation of historical trauma, teaching shame and encompassing psychological and social attitudes for the entire lost generation to carry onwards past the closing of the last school.

In part with the implementation of residential schools, societal modernization brought upon Inuit communities contributed to the marginalization of traditional Inuit practices. Kakiniit sometimes served as acupuncture or pain relief, but with the arrival of Europeans came modern medicine, which replaced the needle with the pill (Szabo 2021). Remarkably, similar tattoos dating as far back as 5,300 years ago were found on Ötzi the Iceman, a mummified man from the Copper Age who had tattoos along acupunctural points, suggesting a common practice used across Arctic regions 2,000 years before it was believed to have first emerged in Asia (Solly 2018). Furthermore, the coming of European fashion resulted in the fallout of kakiniit being used for beautification purposes within communities. Slowly but surely, this resulted in the loss of favor of the traditional practice (Szabo 2021).

The loss of knowledge and cultural disruption through colonization – being residential schools and Christian and Catholic assimilation, which snowballed into a cycle of cultural rejection and trauma within Inuit communities unto younger surviving generations – assumed an integral position in the shifting of Inuit societal ideals around historic culture and rituals, including kakiniit. Colonizers shamed Inuit culture and called the markings evil and shamanistic, using the Bible's teachings as rhetoric to dub their ways of life sinful and primitive, as well as having twisted the spiritual

safety and significance of the practice within residential schools through forced tattooing. This resulted in the marginalization and stigmatization of kakiniit within the lost generation, causing it to fade significantly from Inuit communities and knowledge-transmission streams.

Revitalization

The cultural recovery following colonization within Inuit communities was stunted by the residual effects of residential schools and church teachings, with the elder ‘lost generation’ carrying the forced shame and stigma against traditional Inuit practices. Olivia Ikey, an Inuk woman from Kuujuaq Nunavik, describes her grandmother, a survivor of residential schools, as someone who abandoned traditional Inuit beauty standards in favor of those similar to that of conventional European beauty standards, “perm[ing] her hair and wear[ing] pearls and always talked about the afterlife of Jesus and going into the clouds” (O’Bomsawin 2023). Ikey’s description of how colonization’s effects lingered within the older generation’s views and values is akin to the reactions of Inuk filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril’s parents, whose documented reactions to their daughter getting traditional tunniit kakiniit were initially harsh and distasteful.

Her father reacted by saying that should Arnaquq get the tunniit, ‘It will no longer be [her] face; I will never again see [her] as my daughter’ (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). Her mother reacted similarly, saying, “So you really like attention, don’t you?” This initial distaste on behalf of the older generation is seen as hurtful but understood as a learned shameful response towards the younger generation reclaiming kakiniit. It is a response from the deep-rooted traumas of colonization. The elder generation is understood to be ‘hurting and confused,’ as ‘the mere

mention of traditional tattoos [being] enough to send a person into a spitting rage’ (Arnaquq-Baril 2011).

However, efforts of reclamation of kakiniit were never completely eradicated within the era of colonization in the Arctic, as some forms of defiance within residential schools included speaking native languages secretly and tattooing one another in the dark of night in residential dorms. Outside the schools, some Inuit preserved the art of kakiniit through material art production, integrating the geometric patterns within the beadwork or sewn work of women’s parkas or accessories.

These silent acts of defiance grew to spark the contemporary revitalization of kakiniit, which had a massive start with the release of the pioneering documentary *Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos* (Arnaquq-Baril 2011) that sparked inspiration in younger generations across modern-day Nunavut and Greenland Inuit. Prior to this documentary, no significant research had been done on traditional tattooing in the Canadian Arctic. Arnaquq-Baril visited nine communities in the Baffin and Netsilik regions and interviewed fifty-six elders about the meanings of tattoos, how they were done, and how they died out. Various stories of kakiniit meanings, methods, and colonial practices that targeted the tradition were told. Following the release of the documentary and the death of Mary Tallu, the last traditionally tattooed Inuit woman, Angela Hovak Johnston (2017) was inspired to begin the Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project, a non-profit project to travel across Arctic regions to give traditional kakiniit to women in exchange for goods or a meal, as the practice was done pre-Christian contact. Through Johnston’s (2017) book, *Retelling Our Ancestor’s Lines: Revitalizing Inuit Traditional Tattooing*, she retells the account of gathering a group of women, including elders, to provide the traditional tattoos to women across

regions to reclaim the representation of being an Indigenous woman without the historically forced shame attributed to the ink.

The participation of the youth is central to the revitalization movement, as the motivation behind the movement is to connect to one's stolen ancestry and retrace the patterns of their foremothers. Discussing the resurgence of kakiniit practices, present-day scholars like Maya Sialuk Jacobsen discuss how much of the movement began with research to fill gaps within an individual's soul. Jacobsen mentions that the current revitalization is "not a revival, but a reinvention" when speaking of traditional tattooing practices being adapted to modern ages. She states: "The spirituality and hunting aspect [have been removed]. The meaning is all about identity," representing how the current revitalization is a mass movement across the Arctic region to collectively reclaim kakiniit practices while adapting them to contemporary lifestyles (IAQ 2023: 1).

Traditional Sila kakiniit in Greenlandic regions have socially adopted a modern meaning of "the Greenlandic belief that we should be aware of who we are and what we can be, and that is attached to each other" (Dreiager, Coe and Chraborty 2024: 1), reflecting the initial fragmentation of kakiniit across Arctic regions following colonization, but returning to life and recognition once more in a mass effort of reclamation and togetherness.

Arsaniq Deer, a traditional tattoo artist who is a part of the newer revitalization movement from Quaqtaq Nunavik, describes traditional kakiniit representing one's accomplishments, like sewing their first pualuuk mitts or sealskin boots or having a successful hunt. Presently, people with kakiniit create designs with personal meanings behind them, adapted to modern artistic representations of accomplishments such as

graduations, overcoming illness, or honoring friends or family who have passed (O'Bomsawin 2023).

Holly Mitiquq Nordlum is another notable figure in the kakiniit revitalization community, having created an education program on Inuit tattoo traditions with funding from the Anchorage Museum and Alaska Native Heritage Center. The program educated others on tattooing techniques called *Tupik Mi*, traditional Inuit needle-poking techniques. In return, a barter was made, and the tattoo would be done in exchange for meat or goods as it was done traditionally. Her program provided apprenticeship and educated younger generations to heal communities from colonization by re-spreading the seeds of their history to see the surface once more, reclaiming the art by transmitting the knowledge of the practice as it was done generations ago.

In a special edition of *Canadian Geographic*, Jana Angulalik (2021) and her family expressed personal accounts of the significance of the revitalization of kakiniit during a photoshoot.

It was important to photographer Denise Peterson and me to work with Pihuak first and foremost because she is the oldest tattooed woman in our community, wearing her traditional forehead and wrist markings at the age of 81 – markings she remembers her great-grandmother wearing, and now she wears them along with three of her granddaughters. It was as if time had stopped or slowed down – even the undulating stream seemed to have paused in awe. [...] I was completely mesmerized and wondered if the fish swimming beside us also halted mid-water to see four generations of Omilgoetok women and children dressed in their best hand-sewn outfits, with the wind helping itself, dancing in their hair. Head to

toe in Inuit beauty. For one of Pihuaq's granddaughters, Genevieve Lafrance, her wrist markings from her great-great-great grandmother bring a sense of pride and identity. It's a statement that her family is still here. And they aren't going anywhere. (Angulalik 2021: 1)

Revitalization efforts in modern-day Greenland have been described as a "reaction to modernization and increasing cultural homogenization" (Hansen 2022: 8), and the younger generation's involvement with the movement explained as to distinguish themselves from the Danish, representing the pride in reclaiming the apparent display of Inuit culture once shamed. All revitalization efforts have been described as healing and asserting pride in one's Indigenous culture that was victimized by genocide for generations. Cultural reclamation has been met with a shift in the societal attitude and interconnectedness of Indigenous peoples across regions in the Arctic that further supported breaking past existing colonial mindsets to revive tradition and assert one's identity after it has been lost. It is important to note that tattoo meanings and designs that once belonged to specific regions and tribes seem to have blended following the wake of the colonizer's destruction of the practice of kakiniit. Designs and practices are modernized to take on meanings that have transformed alongside the practice, such as surviving a mental illness or mourning (O'Bomsawin 2023).

In Angulalik's narrative, she recounts tattooing her mother's forehead, in which the marking represented her holding her late daughter.

Often, our forehead markings, before our culture was interrupted, signified entering womanhood – the first tattoo to mark shortly

after menstruation began. Now, we are reclaiming our culture and adapting it to fit our life today (Angulalik 2021: 1).

Cora DeVos expands on the significance of the practice in contemporary contexts, describing her collaboration with Hovak Johnston on The Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project as the main photographer for the book *Reawakening Our Ancestor's Line*.

Tattooing was a tradition that was almost lost in our culture due to missionaries forbidding it and residential schools; Inuit were no longer continuing this tradition. The week that we spent in Kugluktuk, Nunavut, was a constant wave of emotions. You could feel the excitement coming from the Inuit women that were receiving their traditional tattoos. At times we cried together, laughed together, and when the tattooing was done – it seemed like the lines were meant to be there. [...] Now with my tattoo, I feel like it brings me closer to my culture than I have ever been before. When I look down at my tattoo and see it there, I know that I belong and I am proud to say that I AM INUK. (DeVos 2017: 1)

DeVos' narrative, in particular, draws a crucial point in the reclamation movement: the revival of kakiniit is not simply a revival of a lost practice and artform. It is a revival of Inuk identity, a sense of belonging in a culture and community that was once shamed. Kakiniit is beyond ink. It is a culture and identities being reborn and reclaimed by generations that suffer from intergenerational traumas that include the loss of identities and community at the hands of colonization.

These narratives and the revitalization efforts for the practice in all forms present across the region draw significance to the cultural

reclamation of kakiniit, which is being adapted into contemporary practices to age along with surviving Indigenous generations. This significance is one of cultural pride and resistance, one that carries the stories of how a forbidden practice for ancestors is reclaimed and celebrated by the youth. 'Inuit beauty survives and thrives, even after all the efforts to erase it. We are still here,' the movement says. The notion of a modern Indigenous reclamation movement is not as political or showcase-y as one may picture in their minds: it is not all marches and fundraisers and websites. The simple act of an Indigenous woman existing with kakiniit is a prideful statement of having survived oppression and reclaiming the culture that was almost lost to her.

Importance in a Globally Politicized Arctic

The reclamation of kakiniit in recent years coincides with the growing global interest in the Arctic, a fight for Indigenous Inuit sovereignty in a region sought after for control from global non-Indigenous parties. Components of justice pertaining to climate change are significantly overlooked regarding Indigenous peoples' rights in the Arctic, notably aspects of recognition, distributional justice, and procedural justice (Coggins et al. 2021).

The recognition aspect of justice in the Arctic attends to the social structures, practices, and socio-cultural values that prevent or undermine the recognition of Indigenous individuals and their identities in international counsel. These preexisting challenges around recognition and sovereignty of traditional Arctic lands and ways of life stem from residual underlying socioeconomic and socio-cultural inequalities, which reduces Indigenous recognition and engagement in Arctic counseling,

resulting in reducing the capacity for international parties to adapt to crises like climate change. These inequalities include a history of marginalization, land dispossession and displacement, and assimilation, all resulting from colonization.

Distributional justice concerns the effects of climate change, including impacts and liabilities, and the distribution of adaptation assistance in response to these liabilities. The impacts of climate change on Indigenous communities are disproportionate to their livelihoods and well-being, which violates the rights of these communities to sustain and preserve their traditional lands and resources. For instance, coastal erosion and melting permafrost actively threaten archaeological sites across the Arctic. In Alaska, this includes an Ipiutak cemetery, and in northwestern Canada, this threatens the most culturally significant Inuvialut archaeological sites. The distribution of adaptation assistance in response to this level of threat is little to none. There is little prioritization of Indigenous peoples' growing vulnerability in adaptation policies in response to climate change.

Procedural justice refers to the extent to which individuals influence the decisions per their rights to contribute to the decision-making processes. It is customary practice for governments across the Arctic Council to consult with Indigenous peoples before undergoing initiatives. Still, the practice is insufficient as socio-political decisions relating to land and resource management often undermine the legally established agency of Indigenous peoples by failing to formally recognize them and their input beyond the written law. This is a result of the disadvantageous power dynamics between Arctic Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities and rooted in discrimination. The effects of early assimilation policies in the Arctic

focused on repressing Inuit culture and identity presence, which remains prevalent in areas of law and counsel today.

The revitalization of kakiniit within Inuit communities acts not only as personal fulfillment and reclamation but also as an implication of authoritative self-hood in response to the extended Western presence in the Arctic. Historian Steven Leuthold articulates the definition of Indigenous self-representation by summarizing the relationship between Western entities and Indigenous groups through art and, in this context, kakiniit:

‘The question of Indigenous self-representation can only arise in the context of neo-colonialism. In a non-colonial, or post-colonial, system, artistic expressions of native cultures are simply the expression of a local culture rather than Indigenous political representations [...] Indigenous self-representation implies selfhood distinct from the influence of foreign nations; it also implies the authority to those nations. Indigenous self-representation primarily involves a shift in authority, implying that inherent in cross-cultural representations are the dynamics of power.’ The revitalization efforts being described as reinvention and not revival by Jacobsen displays clearer in this context, as kakiniit is displayed as art and a visible symbol of kakiniit existence that engages with Western knowledge and decisions in defiance of colonial legacies, exerting Indigenous political agency and ‘signifying a shift in power but not a ‘return’ to pre-colonial expressive forms.’ (Leuthold 2011: 47)

When discussing the Inuit tattoo revitalization movement, artists have connected

pre-contact kakiniit practices to its contemporary resurgence while confronting the European responses to them. They adapted the movement to be both an act of cultural preservation and reclamation and an artistic statement of sovereignty that plays a pertinent role in the ongoing self-determination process of Indigenous presence within the Arctic, coinciding with other movements such as No More Stolen Sisters, Land Back, ReconciliACTION, and the Coastal GasLink Pipeline protests in Wet’suwet’en territories in British Columbia. Arctic Indigenous peoples, by exercising traditional kakiniit practices and reinventing Indigenous pride in a contemporary political setting, are forming effective challenges to conventional concepts of territory and initiatives across the circumpolar north, securing and affirming their rights as a people and exercising control over their identities in the face of residual colonial social attitudes.

Conclusion

The post-colonial existence of the Inuit and their marks of defiance and assertion is challenging. Traditional Inuit kakiniit are particularly fragmented in modern times, as the traditional set of forehead, cheeks, and chin tattoos still face a society in which colonization has influenced both the outside ‘Other’ world and their own to view the markings of their ancestors as clashing with Western beauty standards. In a Westernized and Christianized existence, many Inuit fail to comprehend the deep heritage behind kakiniit, as beyond its resurrection lies generations of spirituality and purpose, disconnected from its past. There is an undeniable loss of original purpose. Still, it is equally known that a new framework is growing in its place, one that reclaims Indigenous identity as being as

inevitable as the practice stands in time. From the bottoms of the oceans where Sedna lays to the thoughts of further adapting what triumphs one will mark on oneself, kakiniit remains a consistent aesthetic and cultural paradigm in the past, present, and future, and what was lost to the past is quickly being transformed and renewed to adapt and prevail following their mother's lines.

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