



• ANCESTRAL • INK

SACRED TATTOO
MARKINGS ARE
RETURNING TO
GREENLAND,
RAISING QUESTIONS
ABOUT WHAT IT
MEANS TO RECLAIM
TRADITION.

BY ANNA SMITH

“They travelled from Siberia to East Greenland without changing over the course of 4,000 years,” Maya Sialuk Edelfelt Koch Madsen says, backed by more than 15 years of research into Inuit tattoo traditions. “The only things that don’t change are the things you’re not allowed to. They had to be sacred.”

Inuttut kakiornert, the Greenlandic word for traditional Inuit tattoos, touch every part of traditional Inuit life. They keep balance between the natural world and the spirit world, appeasing the spirits and keeping their “taboos.” Among many things, a woman’s inuttut kakiornert would assist her community’s hunt in a harsh northern environment by helping an animal into the spirit world, allowing life and death to continue their cycle. “They are spiritual, they are religious, they are for women, done by women, and it has been that way since before we even existed,” Madsen explains.

Inuttut kakiornert arrived in Greenland, Madsen’s homeland, from Siberia. The lines and symbols carved into a 4,000-year-old Chukotka mask are the same as those worn by Greenland’s 500-year-old Qilakitsoq mummies. In turn, the patterns of the archaeological record could be seen on Greenlandic women for centuries after, until missionaries and colonists stamped them out through proselytization and shame.



The practice had disappeared from West Greenland by the 1770s — until a decade ago. Since the early 2010s, a small group of researchers and tattoo artists from across the Inuit world have been piecing together patterns, historical records, and photographs to rebuild an understanding of the sacred practice.

When the Greenland National Museum hosted exhibits and workshops on this research in 2017, the kakiornit began appearing once more on the faces, arms, hands, and legs of modern Greenlandic women. Knowledge keepers and society at large are now figuring out the role these ancient markings can play in a 21st-century nation.

REVISITING TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Madsen, who is from Qeqertarsuaq in West Greenland, began her research into inuttut kakiornit after a shoulder injury prevented her from working as a Western-style tattoo artist in Denmark. “I didn’t know anyone who knew anything about it,” she says. “The only thing I knew was that we had the mummies and they had tattoos.”

Over five years, she created a tattoo map of the Arctic, tracking their changes over time and space and piecing together their religious and spiritual



uses. Only after this first half-decade of research did she feel knowledgeable enough to practice kakiuineq, the act of giving kakiornit. “I had a very strong feeling of responsibility and caution. Even though I waited, there are things I thought I understood that have changed over time,” Madsen says.

As Madsen’s research progressed, more artists across the Inuit world began recreating the markings. Notably, artist Hovak Johnston was launching the Inuit Tattoo Revitalization Project across Canada, inspired by the death of the last woman in her community who wore the tattoos. This also coincided with a global Indigenous tattoo movement.

Cultural anthropologist Lars Krutak says, “Materials became more accessible with the advent of the internet, and tattooing had become much more widespread. That broke the ice.”

Madsen worked on a project at the Anchorage Museum in Alaska in 2015, but in 2017, when funding was cut for Indigenous projects in the U.S., she decided to take her work back to her birthplace. Her exhibition and workshops garnered immediate interest, particularly from women who wanted to

learn about the lives of their foremothers. “It was instinctively understood that this is for women,” Madsen recalls. “What were they doing besides sewing, preparing food, and having babies? Why were they tattooed?”

Madsen tattooed several women on that first trip, and around the same time, Nuuk-based artist Ikimalik Pikilak also began working with inuttut kakiornit. In the decade since, Krutak believes the number of women with facial tattoos in Greenland has risen from single digits to over 100. Across the Arctic and the Kingdom of Denmark (which contributes two-thirds of Greenland’s budget revenue, according to the BBC), the number of women with traditionally-inspired markings may be in the thousands.

REVIVAL OR REINVENTION?

The reason individuals have embraced the markings varies widely. For Nadja Arnaaraq Kreutzmann, Greenland’s only trained goldsmith, it was a no-brainer. After seeing a painting



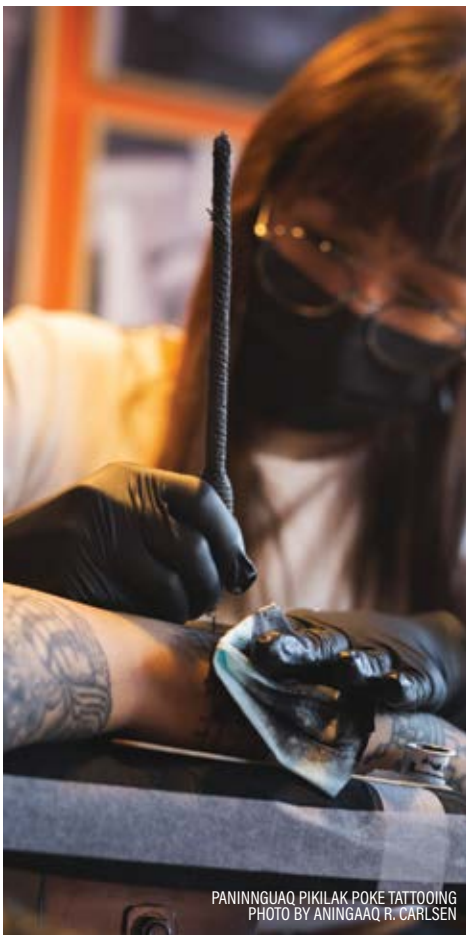
depicting inuttut kakiornit, she researched the history via Madsen’s online project, Inuit Tattoo Traditions, and soon received her markings from Madsen herself.

Kreutzmann, whose father worked on a shrimp trawler, explains that the ‘Y’ shape repeated around her forearm can help to protect fishermen at sea — not only her father, but all of her community’s fishermen. She designed a line of kakiornit-inspired jewelry, including the ‘Y’ symbol for non-Inuit women who have a strong connection to Greenland, like her mother, or those who don’t want tattoos. A young Air Greenland cabin crew member who wears a ring designed by Kreutzmann says it helps to protect her partner, who is also a fisherman.

A 2022 paper in Scandinavian-Canadian Studies reveals even more perspectives. Some Greenlanders believe the resurgence of the markings is a reaction



MAYA SIALUK EDELFELT KOCH MADSEN
POKE TATTOOING



PANINNGUAQ PIKILAK POKE TATTOOING
PHOTO BY ANINGAAQ R. CARLSEN

to rapid modernization, others use them to display their Greenlandic identity, and some use them to reject colonial legacies.

The symbols, patterns, and placements of the tattoos are often adapted to suit these various motivations. “Our tattoos are very dividable because they are lines and dots. We can say I want 20 lines or I want three, but you are supposed to have a certain amount according to where you come from,” Madsen says.

For this reason, Madsen avoids using the word “revival” to describe the recent adoption of the markings. Instead, she uses “reinvention,” as she hopes to make a distinction between the traditional spiritual markings and the neo-traditional ones. “The patterns are not the same; the purpose is not the same. It’s inspired by the original but only visually,” she says. She believes a culture of individualism and Western beauty standards now supersedes Inuit religion and regional affiliations as a source of modern design inspiration.

Madsen acknowledges that the need for the markings has shifted. “I am not a woman married to a hunter,” she says. “I’m not getting my tattoos to assist his hunt and follow the taboos.” But she works to educate her clients on the tradition.

Her perspective is also not universally popular. A similar opinion shared by Pikilak on Instagram ([@ikimilak_pikilak](#)) reads, “I am witnessing the same approach (in Western tattooing) to personalize tattoos. That takes our traditional patterns away from their original context as well as erases the ancestral wisdom that comes with them.”

Her post garnered a lot of attention, with comments including, “We don’t have to live in the past, only using the common markings of our ancestors,” and “I think a colonial mindset is thinking Inuit tattoos are ‘one way.’” Madsen also hopes that inuttut kakiornertit can be separated from activist and political affiliations, saying, “This heritage belongs to all of us (Inuit), even if we love the Queen or we love Jesus.”

WHAT REMAINS SACRED

Despite the changes inuttut kakiornertit are going through, Madsen has a minority of clients who follow an Inuit religion and receive entirely traditional markings. It is for these clients that Madsen might revert to the traditional kakiuineq method: skin stitching.

Originally, the sinew of a caribou would be saturated with soot and oil or urine and drawn beneath the upper layers of skin with a bone needle. Madsen learned the technique using modern materials by reading the accounts of a 19th-century ship captain and experimenting on her “research leg.” “It’s not a great way to tattoo — it looks shitty, it takes time, it’s more painful and inconvenient,” she says. For her, intention and understanding are the most important parts of inuttut kakiornertit, and she does not believe that intention can be placed on a specific tool or machine.

The resurgence and reinvention of inuttut kakiornertit constitutes just 10 years of its 4,000-year history. As the markings find their place in a modern Greenland, researchers like Madsen are still discovering more about their traditional uses. Beyond the complex conversations about misconceptions, use, and misappropriation, Madsen highlights their importance for the women who create and wear them. “The tattoos,” she says, “are a beautiful example of cosmology, of life, of the world.”



PANINNGUAQ PIKILAK
PHOTO BY ANINGAAQ R. CARLSEN