

## Is Kalaallit Nunaat for Its People? Inuit Reflections on American (and Danish) Colonization

by Vivi Vold with Kunuk Inutiq

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**KALAALLIIT NUNAAT**, so-called Greenland, is at the centre of geo-political news today. Amid renewed American imperialism and fraying international alliances, there is much discussion of NATO, the European Union, Denmark, Russia, and China – politics revolving around states.

**Where are the voices of Kalaallit? Once again, in the realm of international politics, Indigenous People are an afterthought, sidelined, or our voices caught in a colonial narrative.**

Kalaallit Nunaat is Inuit land. Despite Danish colonization, it remains so. How will this new wave of imperialism – and rising fascism – be confronted?

This Brief considers the long history of attempts to colonize Kalaallit Nunaat, followed by Inuit resistance and the movement towards independence. With renewed imperialism threatening Kalaallit Nunaat, old wounds are reemerging. How can Denmark and the broader global community choose to stand with Kalaallit as geopolitical pressure and renewed imperial interests intensify around Kalaallit Nunaat?

### A Brief History of Attempts to Control Kalaallit Nunaat

Inuit outlived various groups passing through this land, remaining the stewards of the land and original inhabitants of Kalaallit Nunaat. They experienced colonialism similar to many Indigenous Peoples around the world: land theft, removal of children from their families, strict assimilation policies, forced relocations, and broader systems of domination designed to break the

spirit of Indigenous Peoples to subdue them. This history dates back to the 10th century with the arrival of Norse groups who settled numerous regions of Kalaallit Nunaat for over 400 years, though eventually disappearing. This long tenure was followed by Hans Egede's Danish-Norwegian Mission in 1721, which sought to find any lost Norse settlements (there were none).

Instead, organized assimilation campaigns of Inuit began via Christianization and continued through colonial Danish policies over the centuries.

It would be a few hundred years before another sought Kalaallit Nunaat. U.S. Navy Officer Robert Peary spent time in Kalaallit Nunaat. In 1894, he took Inuit to travel to New York City – four out of the six Inuit died of disease in 1909. He claimed to be the first to reach the North Pole and also stole precious metals from Kalaallit Nunaat to sell the Cape York iron meteorite.

The Americans would come in greater numbers during World War II. In spring 1941, Denmark's ambassador to the U.S. signed a treaty granting the U.S. military access to Kalaallit Nunaat to help protect the island from Nazi Germany. That treaty remains in effect today. Two military bases were built by the U.S. and, until recently, were the only major airports in Kalaallit Nunaat. After Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany, the United States assumed responsibility for Kalaallit Nunaat's defense while monitoring the North Atlantic for threats. This established a lasting American military presence, enduring into the Cold War and later during renewed geopolitical interest in the Arctic in the early 2000s, when Russia began building Arctic military infrastructure.

Meanwhile, Denmark, with its very tenuous claim to Kalaallit Nunaat, declared the Island theirs in a revised Constitution. In response to the activism of Indigenous

People globally, the United Nations (UN) urged colonial states to “decolonize”, abandon their colonies, and support Indigenous self-determination. In 1953, Denmark decided that Kalaallit Nunaat was no longer a colony but “integrated” into the Kingdom of Denmark – though the people of Kalaallit Nunaat were never asked. This shift in discourse suppressed any decolonization process for Kalaallit Nunaat and allowed Denmark to bypass UN rules to maintain authority. With this constitutional change, colonization proceeded, including the re-location, assimilation, and genocidal planning against Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat.

Denmark’s imposed authority resulted in acts of genocide. Between 1966 and the late 1980s, thousands of Inuit girls and women had intrauterine devices (IUDs) inserted to prevent pregnancy. Half of the 9,000 women in Kalaallit Nunaat who could have children were given IUDs in the first five years of the program. Some of the girls forced to have IUDs were still children as young as 12 years old. In many cases, women, and for girls, their parents, did not consent to the procedure. Many had no knowledge of what was happening and no information about the procedure’s effects on their bodies. Those women were mothers and aunties; the girls were daughters. Even in cases of consent, it was shaped in the context of coercion and fear of the state and doctors.

**Thousands of Inuit women and girls were denied bodily autonomy and the ability to create the next generation of Inuit children. This was not only an assault on Inuit women and girls – an entire generation of Inuit children were never born.**

Meanwhile, Denmark was mining Kalaallit Nunaat. Some mines were off limits for Inuit (see film Det Hvide Guld about Danish extraction of cryolite in Ivittuut). These mines extracted huge amounts of minerals like cryolite, taking the benefits and growth away from local areas and from Inuit, generally. Incidentally, American troops garrisoned the area during WWII to protect it from German seizure.

In other instances, Inuit and villages were used as sites of extraction and labor. In 1972, residents of one of Kalaallit Nunaat’s largest towns, Qullissat, were forcibly relocated because of a Danish coal mine closure.

Seven hundred residents moved away in the first wave of relocation after services were cut to the community. The remaining 500 residents were “compulsorily” relocated.

Inuit have always been against colonial rule. As the consequences of colonization became clearer, it raised the political consciousness of Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat. They began to challenge Danish rule. Challenges came first through music – the band Sumé performed in their language, Kalaallisut, about identity, resistance, and Inuit culture, inspiring a movement. Inuit political parties formed, eventually culminating in a 1979 referendum on “Home Rule” which received resounding support by 70% of voters. As a result, Kalaallit Nunaat obtained legislative powers in several key areas, including education, health, fisheries, and environmental management, although within the framework of the Kingdom of Denmark.

This was a pivotal moment for Kalaallit Nunaat, as it allowed the Nation to define its own identity and self-determination to the point that independence became a clear goal. In 2009, after another resounding referendum with 76% in favor, the Act on Greenland Self-Government – Kalaallit Nunaanni Namminersorneq pillugu inatsisissa – replaced the home rule arrangement through the Kalaallit Nunaanni Namminersorerullutik Oqartussat pillugit inatsisissaq, further expanding Kalaallit Nunaat’s autonomy toward full independence and sovereignty.

## Power Politics and the Return of Colonial Trauma

The momentum towards self-determination is threatened by renewed attempts to colonize Kalaallit Nunaat. The threat is two-fold: first, the imperial rhetoric of the American President Donald Trump and the Western world’s weak response – shaped by a desperation to appease in service to their own political and economic stability. The second is that the rise of imperialist rhetoric has normalized contemporary colonialism and erased Indigenous perspectives, as states such as Denmark and Canada act as though Inuit do not exist. Just as the history of Kalaallit Nunaat is obscured from the conversation, so too are Inuit voices from this contemporary moment: understated, sidelined, or de-centered, even hijacked in western/colonial discourses. The silencing is dehumanizing. It is critical, then, to humanize the narrative – recognizing that Inuit are their own agents and decision makers of their destiny, with inherent rights and sovereignty. As Inuit emphasize, “Nothing about us, without us”.

## **Incessant imperialism is set against the backdrop of actual people in the Arctic living their everyday lives: with their families and communities speaking their language and with cultural integrity, with desires to live free.**

So, the colonial playbook returns with a vengeance. The American President is seeking to divide the population, create chaos, uncertainty, and fear. While some argue that these renewed claims to Kalaallit Nunaat are merely an attempt to distract the American public from their own issues and the criminality of its leaders, the uncertainty and confusion affect Inuit. It is not a safe time, considering there appears to be no reasoning with the madness of imperialism and rising fascism. Hence, for us, it is dire that we focus on coming together in our shared humanity.

In Kalaallit Nunaat, many of us feel a real fear now. It is not irrational. It comes from historical experiences in body, mind, and spirit; intergenerational traumas that are reawakened whenever there is talk again of loss of land, coercion, and unequal power relations that we have endured for generations.

The rhetoric of the United States is not merely chaotic; it is imperialist and colonialist. A superpower that threatens annexation and military pressure, disregards international laws, and uses the Arctic as a tool of coercion creates instability everywhere. It is this behaviour that activates our nervous systems. We understand it far too well.

At the same time, we again see a lack of understanding from the Danish side. When our fear is dismissed as an overreaction or “being too emotional”, it repeats a long Danish colonial pattern. The viewing of Inuit as irrational, childish, or ruled by emotion is a stereotype rooted in missionary writings and political discourse. Those racist beliefs continue to shape how Inuit are spoken to and about. It is an expression of power-blindness. When Danish politicians speak down to us, patronize us, are paternalistic, and exclude our own elected representatives from some of the conversations with the United States, it does not create safety. It deepens the embedded inequality in our society.

Our wish for independence is not new. Political independence is reinforced in international law and UN frameworks for former colonized countries. It is written into the Self-Government Act and is a legitimate political goal. It is the path Kalaallit Nunaat is on. To use this aspiration against us as a sign of irresponsibility, re-creating colonial hierarchies, where “Kalaallit Nunaat belongs to its People” only if we behave in ways acceptable to a Danish or imperialist gaze.

If Denmark wants a united front on this crisis, it requires a language that acknowledges us – not silences us. Something as simple as: “We understand that this can awaken old wounds, and because we want to address them, and our past wrongdoings, we stand with you.”

Allies do not speak down. Friends do not demand silence. A community does not become strong by ignoring our experiences, but rather by listening to them.

Our words are not about supporting the United States. On the contrary, they are about our democratic and relational responsibility to say out loud what happens in body, mind, and spirit when the world moves in harmful ways. Voicing and listening to these experiences is necessary if we don't want old patterns and history to repeat themselves.

### **Support for Kalaallit Nunaat**

What can you do, as a global citizen, to help the situation in Kalaallit Nunaat? Very simply: work in solidarity with Inuit. Read and watch material written by Inuit. Listen to Inuit. When relevant, read Circumpolar Inuit Protocols created by Inuit. Amplify our voices. For centuries, Inuit have managed the Arctic. Across the entirety of Inuit lands, organizations and institutions have been established to facilitate diplomacy.

Inuit, alongside Sami (and many other Indigenous groups), have been at the forefront of Indigenous Peoples rights – in high-level fora, exercising our rights towards self-determination. Inuit have been integral to creating, working, uniting, and leading this kind of work, helping to create the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples at the UN and working through the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Inuit aren't just activists; they have been working tirelessly on a global level.

Now, we organize once again, back to basic civil rights movement tactics: taking part in mass mobilization efforts and civil disobedience. Imperialism is seeking to redefine itself. Inform yourself about how power is maintained and resist it. It is only as a global community that we will challenge the violence happening.

**It is no accident that Inuit have always punched above their weight in world politics. Given where we live, we have to be strategic, tenacious, and brave. The strength of Inuit is our community.**

In difficult times, we come together to provide love and support for one another. We urge the world to do the same. The antidote to global domination is simple – communities coming together to resist in solidarity.

## CITATION

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