Contemporary Development of Qassaaneq in Iserdor, East Kalaallit Nunaat

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the contemporary development of *qassaaneq,* which is the manual removal of fat from sealskin using an *ulu* (crescent-shaped knife) in Iserdor (Isortoq), East Kalaallit Nunaat (East Greenland), exploring the theme of fluidity and adaptability of Kalaallit (Greenlandic-Inuit) gendered roles in sealskin production. This study contributes to management and organization studies by centering Kalaallit perspectives on work and organizing. Mainstream knowledge production in the field is constructed by coloniality which marginalizes non-Western and Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and understanding work and organization. Drawing on fieldwork, this study explores how the Iserdor community organizes *qassaaneq* for sealskin trade, examining the tensions and efforts to sustain *qassaaneq* and their visions for future. The findings reveal how the community navigates tensions between colonial structures and their Indigenous worldview, offering insights into alternative ways shaped by their values and practices.

KEY WORDS

COLONIALITY, MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS STUDIES, KALAALLIT NUNAAT, GENDERED ROLES, SEALSKIN

INTRODUCTION

This article illuminates a localized way of organizing sealskin production in the hunting community called Iserdor (Isortoq) in East Kalaallit Nunaat (East Greenland) with approximately 50 inhabitants where sealskin trading is the primary economic activity. Drawing on interviews with Iserdor hunters and women from 2021, the analysis focuses on the contemporary development of *qassaaneq*, which is the removal of fat from sealskin by using an *ulu*, a crescent-shaped knife. Historically practiced by Inuit women in the Arctic (Peter et al., 2002), this article explores the fluidity of gendered roles and adaptability of *qassaaneq* as part of broader efforts to sustain and develop sealskin production. These localized practices stand in contrast to historic representations that have mischaracterized Kalaallit (Greenlandic-Inuit) sealing practices as male-dominated (Williamson, 2011) and belonging to the past without any connection to contemporary society (Graugaard, 2020; Pfeifer, 2019). Instead, this study highlights how *qassaaneq* in Iserdor is a living, adaptive practice with ongoing economic, social, and cultural significance to Kalaallit.

This article engages with the coloniality of management and organizations knowledge (MOK) that has historically privileged Western epistemologies that largely embrace the idea of unbridled economic growth while marginalizing alternative epistemologies (Banerjee et al., 2021). Coloniality operates by imposing a modern, colonial, and gendered system that positions the white, bourgeois, European male as the fully developed human above other genders, races, and non-humans (Lugones, 2010). Those who have been deemed inferior, irrational, primitive, and traditional have been *Othered* from knowledge production. As a result, non-Western and Indigenous experiences and perspectives remain underexplored, especially in the English language (Cuoto et al., 2019; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Manning, 2021).

The article is organized into five sections. First, the research setting in Iserdor to provide context about the community. Second, the theoretical framework addresses the coloniality of MOK, situating the research within discussions on colonial power structures that marginalize non-Western Indigenous ways of organizing. Third, the methods section describes a decolonizing research approach as an Indigenous scholar. Fourth, the analysis examines the efforts and tensions involved in sustaining *qassaaneq* and explores the Iserdor community's aspirations for the future of sealskin production. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key contributions of the study.

RESEARCH SETTING: SEALSKIN PRODUCTION IN ISERDOR

Iserdor is located in the Ammassalik region of East Kalaallit Nunaat where Tasiilaq serves as the main town alongside surrounding settlements: Kulusuk, Kuummiit, Sermiligaaq, and Tiilerilaaq (Tiniteqilaaq). The Ammassalik region has a distinctive history, culture, traditions, and language compared to West and North Kalaallit Nunaat. Eastern Kalaallit were perceived as less developed than Western Kalaallit by Danish authorities and were thus excluded from Danification policies from the 1950s that included the Danification and industrialization of West Kalaallit Nunaat (Hendriksen, 2013; Markussen, 2024). As a result, the fishing industry remains underdeveloped, leaving communities like Iserdor reliant on sealskin trading for income.

Records from 1942 describe Iserdor as a permanent settlement consisting of six stone and turf houses, one also functioning as a school and another as a church (Hovelsrud-Broda, 1999). Today, all buildings are wooden and Iserdor is equipped with key public infrastructure: helipad, electricity, school, church, and general store called Pilersuisoq. In 2021, there were four to six hunters in Iserdor throughout the year. Other community members were mainly occupied in the public sector.

Iserdor has a service house called Sullissivik that has a room for *qassaaneq* and another room with four chest freezers to store sealskins. The Sermersooq Municipality employs one person to facilitate sealskin trading, and two older women to perform *qassaaneq* when the hunters come back from hunting. After *qassaasut* (those who carry out *qassaaneq*) remove the fat from sealskin, the sealskin is stored in a bag with salt in the freezer until it is transported to the headquarters of the national sealskin company Great Greenland in Qaqortoq, South Kalaallit Nunaat. Great Greenland is a state-owned enterprise subsidized by the government to finance sealskin trading with hunters. Great Greenland receives approximately DKK 26 million every year in government support. Its societal role is to help support livelihood for hunters in remote areas with few alternative sources of income (Departement for Finanser og Ligestilling, 2023). Thus, a reduction or elimination of government subsidies to sealskin trading could increase hunters' dependency on social aid or prompt migration from settlements and smaller towns to larger towns (Garde, 2013).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The field of management and organizations studies (MOS) has suffered from epistemic coloniality in the last 170 years (Ibarra-Colado, 2006). Coloniality refers to a pattern of power in which Eurocentrism has enabled the reproduction of territorial, racial, and epistemic domination relationships after the end of colonial administrations (Cuoto et al., 2021; Grosfoguel, 2002; Quijano, 2000). The pattern works by displacing and marginalizing the bodies, actions, ideas, and knowledge of the Global South which, from the ontology of coloniality, is considered non-modern (Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Manning, 2021). It is the ideas of the male, white, and bourgeois philosophical thought that have been naturalized to represent the neutral, objective, and universal truth in the field of MOS, and as a consequence, denying others access to their own representation (Gherardi, 2009; Manning, 2021; Nkomo, 1992).

The epistemic erasure also manifests in how organizing practices within non-Western and Indigenous communities are represented. For instance, in the context of Kalaallit Nunaat, the ontology of coloniality has shaped representations of hunting-related activities as exclusively dominated by men, erasing the interdependent nature between men and women and the significant contributions of women to the production and development of hunting economy such a sealskin (Williamson, 2011). According to Poppel (2015), researchers generally agree that, prior to colonization, the division of labor in Inuit communities was gendered, with men primarily engaging in hunting and women assuming reproductive roles, which reproduce the colonial and patriarchal gaze. By contrast, Williamson (2011) argues that women's role in society extended far beyond reproductive responsibilities as they also played an integral role in hunting-related activities across various contexts. It was the woman's responsibility to prepare sealskin in various ways according to its use such as for making clothes, *qaannat* (qajaq, plural), or to sell sealskin (Peter et al., 2002). In Iserdor, such interdependent gendered roles have been documented over time. A 1962 study (Sutton, 1964) and subsequent research in 1999 (Hovelsrud-Broda, 1999) describe gendered division of labor in which men and women maintained mutual respect and interdependence within the community.

While the logic of coloniality has colonized the epistemic, cultural, social, and political systems, the logic of coloniality has also imposed capitalism as an economic and civilizing force to the point where people cannot consider any other alternative (Dussel & Ibarra-Colado, 2006 in Manning, 2021). In doing so, the logic of coloniality also manifests itself in what has become taken-for-granted assumption about growth as a central tenet of organizational and economic activity. Growth is understood as progress which aligns with the colonial narratives that prioritize accumulation, expansion, and extraction (Banerjee et al., 2021). This naturalization of capitalist systems has created a monoculture of economically rational organizations, erasing other modes of organizing that

value collective well-being over capitalist imperatives (Cuoto et al., 2021).

In Kalaallit Nunaat, this logic is visible in contradictory positions on the future of sealskin trading. Some politicians argue that continued subsidies for sealskin trading are essential as sealskin trading helps to support the livelihoods of hunters with few sources of alternative income. By contrast, a 2023 government report recommends phasing out sealskin trading, framing it as socio-economically unsustainable and claiming that it diverts potential labor from other industries that need labor (Departement for Finanser og Skat, 2023). Ending the subsidies and phasing out sealskin trading would have significant economic and cultural consequences for those whose livelihoods depend on it such as in Iserdor.

METHODS AND FIELDWORK

Any research conducted *in* and *on* Indigenous Peoples raises sensitive and complex issues of power relations between researcher and research-participants, subjectivity due to researcher positionality, and in relation to that, epistemic interpretation (Banerjee & Tedmanson, 2010; Smith, 1999). In relation to this study, I recognize my positionality as Nuummioq (someone from Nuuk), educated from Western universities on American and Scandinavian business principles, and have migrated to Denmark. On one hand, I hold a privileged position to have insider knowledge about our collective history, culture, and traditions as Kalaallit. For instance, my grandmother has worked with sealskin, I have tried performing *qassaaneq* as part of school curriculum, and I come from generations of hunters and fishermen. On the other hand, I am an outsider in Iserdor, a community with its own distinctive language, history, and culture. Fieldwork for three weeks is not enough to form relations with community members and to form contextual knowledge about their specific sealing practices. It is thus reasonable to ask what authorizes me to speak on localized organizing in Iserdor that is located 600 km from my birthplace and 2,700 km from Denmark. Drawing on the reflections of Banerjee and Tedmanson (2010), I recognize that any attempt to engage with voices and practices that are often marginalized in dominant discourses requires careful ethical consideration. Rather than speaking *for* the people of Iserdor, my aim is to illuminate organizing practices that emerge from the margins which challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative pathways from within Kalaallit Nunaat.

My methodological approach was guided by 'critical reflexivity as a relational process' (Gerlach, 2018) which emphasizes reflection on one own's positionality (Alvesson et al., 2008; Holmes, 2020), asymmetrical power relations with research-participants, and accountability in terms of representing research-participants (Gerlach, 2018). To reduce power asymmetry between myself and research-participants, I encouraged them to speak in their native language Dunumiisu (Eastern Kalaallisut (Greenlandic)), I moved away from "researcher as expert" by telling them that I was in Iserdor to learn from them (Gerlach, 2018), and I let them decide the day and time for interviews as to not interrupt their hunting-related activities.

I employed the following qualitative methods to gain insight into the community's organizational practices and perspectives on sealskin production: a) recorded focus group interview with four out of six hunters to explore the themes of the supply-side working practices and the hunters' future dreams and concerns for sealskin production and hunting, b) unrecorded focus group interview with the women of Iserdor to explore their interests and roles in sealskin production and sealskin making, and on their dreams and concerns for sealskin production and hunting, and finally c) recorded interview with the CEO of Great Greenland about their plans for sustaining and developing sealskin production. While these methods provided useful insights into the contemporary development of *qassaaneq*, I remain critical toward the limited timeframe of fieldwork inevitably constrained the depth of relationships and the breadth of observations I could make, particularly in relation to locally specific ways of practicing *qassaaneq*. Therefore, my findings should be read as situated interpre-

tation shaped by the voices and experiences shared with me during the short but intensive engagement.

I would like to acknowledge the socially constructed gendered framework that has shaped my research design and fieldwork. During my fieldwork, I operated with presupposed assumptions about gender, which influenced my interactions with research-participants. Specifically, I did not inquire about participants' gender identities and instead relied on my own interpretations. For example, in an invitation to a focus group interview, I addressed individuals I perceived as women in the community under the heading, "Invitation to Women of Iserdor" (own translation from Kalaallisut to English), (Møller, personal communication, 2021). Of those invited, eight individuals attended whom I presumed to be women. The division of labor in Kalaallit hunting societies has also historically been gendered, with men and women traditionally taking on distinct responsibilities (Williamson, 2011). To maintain alignment with the gendered language used during fieldwork and to reflect the historical context of gendered roles in Kalaallit Nunaat, I will continue employing gendered terminology in the forthcoming analysis.

ANALYTICAL FRAME

One of the purposes of a decolonizing research approach is to promote pluriversality (Cuoto et al., 2021). The purpose of this article is thus not to make a detailed attempt to define practices that could be generalized, but to better understand how the Iserdor people organize the production of sealskin. This section brings an analysis of the way that the Iserdor community understand and organize their work in sealskin production through the practice of *qassaaneq*. The analysis is structured in three parts: 1) The efforts of sustaining *qassaaneq*, 2) the tensions of sustaining *qassaaneq*, and 3) their hopes of future development of sealskin production in their homeland.

THE EFFORTS TO SUSTAIN QASSAANEQ

The practice of *qassaaneq* is only one of many other practices that Kalaallit women have practiced for generations to transform raw, animal, skin material into essential items such as clothing, tents, kayak, and *umiaq* (large skin boat), as well as into tradeable products such as sealskin (Williamson, 2011). *Qassaaneq* has historically been gendered where skills and knowledge have been passed down through generations of women. In the context of sealskin production, the contributions of women, which are transforming raw sealskins into a tradeable product, have been indispensable. This first part of analysis focuses on the critical role of *qassaaneq* in sustaining sealskin production, examining how this historically gendered practice has evolved to become fluid and adaptable in response to changing social, economic, and cultural dynamics.

As Lugones (2008) points out, the European, white, bourgeois, colonial, modern man was constructed as the embodiment of civilization within the logic of coloniality, while the European, white, bourgeois woman was confined to a reproductive role and serving the man within the domestic sphere. This patriarchal and colonial framework was prevalent among Danes during the early colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat, where they commodified seals and transformed the Kalaaleq hunter into an efficient supplier of seal blubber and sealskin (Graugaard, 2018; Thomsen, 1998). Danish businessmen, operating under their patriarchal assumptions, viewed men as the heads of Kalaallit households and presumed that economic activities were primarily conducted by men. This colonial and patriarchal gaze has rendered the roles of Kalaallit women, portraying production and development of sealskin as male-dominated activities while ignoring the collaborative and interdependent nature of Kalaallit social organization as in other Inuit societies (Pfeifer, 2019; Williamson, 2011, Chapter 7).

By erasing women's critical contributions such as *qassaaneq*, this patriarchal lens creates a significant blind spot about sealskin production and development which risks preventing a comprehensive understanding of the practices in the production process that sustain and develop sealskin production.

In Kalaallit Nunaat, significant political and societal attention has been given to the sealskin ban imposed by the European Union in 2009 and its impact on hunters. Following the ban, the Government of Kalaallit Nunaat and institutions such as the Fishermen and Hunters Association in Greenland (KNAPK) have published various statistics highlighting its effects. These include data on hunters' income losses, the decline in seal hunting, and the sharp decrease in sealskin trading, all of which demonstrate that the ban has disproportionately affected hunters particularly those with few alternative sources of income (e.g., Fontaine, 2014; Departement for Fiskeri, Fangst og Landbrug, 2012). However, the large attention given to hunters in sealskin production creates an unintended perception that only hunters contribute to the sealskin industry. This unintended idea reproduces the patriarchal perspective established during the early colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat. While it is important to address the ban's impact and advocate for hunters' rights, I would like to expand the scope of perspective to focus on the number of seals caught and the number of sealskins traded to shed light on the often-overlooked practice of *qassaaneq* and its critical importance to sealskin production and development. Data on the number of seals caught in recent years is limited, with the most recent unofficial statistics from the Government of Kalaallit Nunaat dating back to 2017 (Departement for Fiskeri, Fangst og Landbrug, personal communication, 2020). These figures indicate that approximately 90,000 seals were caught in 2017, yet only about 30,000 sealskins were traded. It means that 60,000 sealskins were thrown away or kept for private use. In comparison, prior to the sealskin ban in 2005, approximately 190,000 seals were caught annually, and around 115,000 sealskins were traded. The data shows a decline in seal hunting, but also in the practices of preparing sealskin for trade such as *qassaaneq*. More importantly, it underscores the critical role of *qassaasut* in sealskin production, because Kalaallit continue to hunt seals for purposes beyond sealskin trading alone. One could say that there would be no sealskin production without *qassaasut*.

According to a 1999 study by Hovelsrud-Broda, the cultural identity of the people of Iserdor was closely tied to gendered divisions of labor, particularly in relation to seal hunting. Every male hunter acknowledged that his success depended on the knowledge and skills of the woman he partnered with, while women understood that their own and their family's food security relied on the hunting abilities of their male partner or other male household members. Despite the clear division of labor, Hovelsrud-Broda observed a strong sense of mutual respect and interdependence between genders, similar to the observations by Williamson of Kalaallit in general (2011). She also noted that elder women actively transmitted their skills in sealskin preparation to the younger generation, although often met with reluctance which is a tendency she linked to shifting attitudes toward sealskin among younger women (Hovelsrud-Broda, 1999). More than two decades later, these dynamics appear to have intensified. According to the then-CEO of Great Greenland, fewer women across Kalaallit Nunaat are learning and practicing *qassaaneq*, contributing to the gradual disappearance of this culturally significant practice (The then-CEO of Great Greenland, personal communication, 2021. In Iserdor in 2021, two elderly women were employed by the Municipality of Sermersooq to perform *qassaaneq*. When they are unavailable, sealskin production halts, even if hunting continues. In a focus group interview, women from Iserdor confirmed that younger generations are generally uninterested in learning *qassaaneq* and the elder women are hesitant to pressure them into doing so. One older woman expressed a strong desire for younger women to take an interest in learning practices for preparing sealskin, noting with concern that many are not engaged in traditional activities (Focus group interview with women, personal communication, 2021). This

reflects not only a generational shift in values but also the vulnerability of gendered knowledge systems under changing social and economic conditions.

Due to a decline in the number of women capable of performing *qassaaneq*, Great Greenland has experienced an impaired quality of sealskin. The CEO of Great Greenland said that hunters also sometimes carry out *qassaaneq*, but with a knife instead of an *ulu* (a crescent-shaped knife). It is worth mentioning here that *ulu* has historically been used by women. This shift highlights two important issues: first, *qassaaneq* is a form of gendered expertise, traditionally passed down among women and rooted in embodied knowledge; second, replacing *ulu* with a conventional knife, combined with a lack of technique, often results in lower-quality sealskin. The quality of sealskin depends on the skills of *qassaaneq*. Recognizing the economic importance of *qassaaneq*, Great Greenland has taken steps to sustain the practice, as proper *qassaaneq* techniques guarantee the best sealskin quality and thus leads to higher consumer prices. To mitigate the decline of this skill, Great Greenland has organized workshops across the country to teach hunters how to perform *qassaaneq* with an *ulu*. As a result, some hunters have acquired the necessary skills to carry out the practice themselves (The then-CEO of Great Greenland, personal communication, 2021. This suggests that the practice of *qassaaneq* is being adapted by including hunters, predominantly men, to perform it with the primary aim of sustaining sealskin production and not necessarily to preserve traditions for their own sake.

This shift in gender roles highlights how efforts to sustain *qassaaneq* are leading to an increasing involvement of men in the preparation of sealskin for trade. As more men take on this role, the practice of *qassaaneq* undergoes a transformation that could ultimately reframe sealskin production as a male-dominated activity. This adaptation not only alters the division of labor but also raises critical questions about the erasure or reconfiguration of women's roles in sealskin production and development. It reflects broader structural changes within Kalaallit sealing practices, shaped by economic pressures, labor shifts, and evolving gender dynamics.

However, when hunters carry out *qassaaneq*, they receive no additional compensation such as those *qassaasut* employed by the municipality who are compensated for their work (Former hunter in Iserdor, personal communication, 2024). Hunters are not entirely optimistic to take on this added responsibility, because it complicates their role as hunters where they receive more work without further monetary compensation in a job already physically demanding and facing economic challenges (Former hunter in Iserdor, personal communication, 2024).

THE TENSIONS OF SUSTAINING QASSAANEQ

This second part of the analysis illustrates tensions of sustaining *qassaaneq* through examining how hunters and *qassaasut* understand work and organization. I identified earlier in the article how the logic of coloniality promotes the pursuit of endless economic growth. The assumption of growth without any limit is taken for granted in mainstream management and organizations studies, where the understanding of organizations as the vehicles for generating continuous material prosperity is reproduced (Banerjee et al., 2021). Part of the decolonizing project is to move in an alternative direction from universalist theoretical models about organizations (Cuoto et al., 2019). By introducing the Iserdor way of understanding and doing organizational work, this part of analysis seeks to challenge the dominant narratives and offer an alternative that values human needs over capital gains.

In 2021, there were six hunters and two *qassaasut* in Iserdor. The hunters supply Great Greenland primarily with skins from ringed and harp seals. Based on the data that I obtained from the Fishermen and Hunters Association in Kalaallit Nunaat (KNAPK) for 2020, the Iserdor hunters supply Great Greenland with over 1,000 units of sealskin per year. There are plenty of ringed and harp seals in the Kalaallit waters and they are not considered endangered species (Naalakkersuisut, 2020). According to the hunters,

seal meat is distributed within the community while the leftovers are given to feed sled dogs (Focus group interview with hunters, personal communication, 2021). Upon returning from a successful hunt, the hunters carry the seals ashore, open them up, remove the skin, and extract the meat. The skin is then handed over to *qassaasut* to remove the fat from sealskin. The practice of *qassaaneq* is physically demanding, and as a result, sealskin production in Iserdor often comes to a halt when *qassaasut* become tired, fall ill, or complete their designated work hours. Here, hunters from the focus group interview describe the production process that follows the rhythm of *qassaasut*. Hunter A: "When *qassaasut* stop, we also stop. It is primarily up to *[qassaasut]*."; Hunter B: "It would be nice to have a machine. Sometimes *qassaasut* also do not want to work. When sealskins become too many, they become tired and do not want to work anymore."; and Hunter C: "The women, *qassaasut*, they have limitations. During summer and fall, *qassaasut* cannot keep up when harp seals come." (own translation from Kalaallisut to English), (Focus group interview with hunters, personal communication, 2021).

When that happens, no one in Iserdor forces them to keep on working to meet certain production goals. Unlike hierarchical management systems that set rigid production targets or prioritize capital gains, the practices in Iserdor are rooted in human-centric values. There is no single leader dictating production goals or adopting corporate motivation strategies to achieve specific output levels. Instead, production is driven by the well-being and agency of individuals, reflecting a balance between economic participation and communal care. This approach contrasts with mainstream organizational models, which typically prioritize profit maximization and set production targets. In Iserdor, no such pressure exists to achieve a specific number of processed sealskins per day. Instead, the production flow is determined by the well-being of *qassaasut*.

However, hunters are not satisfied when the production of sealskin temporarily stops, because it decreases the amount of sealskin they can trade. For instance, hunter B wants *qassaavik* which is a machine that removes fat from sealskin, because a machine unlike humans cannot become tired. Hunter A also sums up what hunters in Iserdor in general want:

Hunter A: "We wish for a *qassaavik* and more chest freezers. As a result, sealskin traded would increase which would also be good for Great Greenland. If possible, it would be good if prices of sealskin could increase as it would alleviate our work. The number of hunters declines when prices go down and rises when prices go up." (own translation from Kalaallisut to English) (Focus group interview with hunters, personal communication, 2021).

According to the hunters interviewed in the focus group, they are capable of hunting more and believe the quantity supplied to Great Greenland could be higher (Focus group interview with hunters, personal communication, 2021). Their desire to increase supply is, however, not driven by a pursuit of limitless economic growth, but by the need to raise their income in order to sustain their profession as hunters. For instance, hunters talk about the inability to pay for the costs of hunting such as purchasing cartridges and fuel for sailing. In those cases, the hunters lend each other money in exchange for seal meat for their dogs. This is exemplified below:

Hunter A: "Everything is so expensive nowadays, cartridges and fuel are expensive (…). If sealskin prices increase, it would be good. It would alleviate hunters. I would also like to mention that for the second year in a row, my request to borrow money to buy a boat has been denied by the bank, because I am only a hunter. They cannot accept that I only trade sealskin. Another example, [hunter B] has tried to borrow money from the bank to buy a new motor for his boat, but he was also rejected because he is only a hunter. Well, hunters are being neglected." (own translation from Kalaallisut to English), (Focus group interview with hunters, personal communication, 2021).

There is a risk that this account may be read as romanticizing the Iserdor hunters as disinterested in economic gain which would reproduce a longstand-

ing trope in academic representations that construct Indigenous Peoples as inherently anti-capitalist or ecologically noble. This kind of framing can obscure the economic pressures that Indigenous Peoples face and inadvertently depoliticize their actions. At the same time, a purely economistic perspective, which would be an analysis based on market rationality, might overlook the culturally and relationally embedded nature of the hunters' organizing practices. My empirical data complicates both perspectives. The Iserdor hunters do seek to increase production of sealskin, but not to pursue limitless economic growth as other large corporations. Rather, their motivations are grounded in the need to sustain their profession to be able to fulfill everyday responsibilities under precarious conditions such as changing sealskin prices, rising costs, and when Great Greenland temporarily stops sealskin trading. Their practices reflect a pragmatic engagement with market economies that is shaped by interdependence, sustaining their way of life, and survival, rather than capitalist expansion. In this sense, they are navigating, and not rejecting, the pressures of capitalist modernity.

THEIR HOPES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT IN SEALSKIN PRODUCTION

This final section of the analysis examines the Iserdor community's aspirations for the future of sealskin production. In focus group interviews, both hunters and women in the community expressed a strong desire for better sealskin prices and the acquisition of a *qassaavik* to replace the manual practice of *qassaaneq*. Their overarching hope is to increase hunters' income to a sustainable level, ensuring they can continue their profession without financial instability. The community sees technological advancement in sealskin processing and improved trading conditions as vital for preserving their way of life. During a focus group interview with women, one participant articulated a shared concern that if hunting is not supported and developed, Iserdor risks being shut down. She emphasized that increasing sealskin prices is necessary to make trading economically viable to the hunters and to prevent the community from being forced into decline (Focus group interview with women, personal communication, 2021).

Despite the centrality of hunting in Iserdor, there is a lack of recent studies providing concrete data on the economic conditions of hunters. However, it is well-documented that hunters who do not have supplementary income from activities such as fishing or tourism often struggle to make ends meet. In such cases, their wife's income becomes a crucial financial pillar for maintaining both the hunter's profession and the household's livelihood (Rasmussen, 2005; Sejersen, 2003). In early colonization, the Kalaaleq hunter was a key figure in the economic framework of Danish colonial administration (Bjørlig, 2021; Thomsen, 1998). Today, however, the hunter's economic role has diminished significantly, leaving many reliant on government subsidies and their wife's earnings to sustain their hunting activities. This shows that the interdependency between hunters and women in sustaining a hunting lifestyle continues within a modern-colonial world.

Beyond sealskin trading, hunters supplement their income by selling various game-hunting byproduct, including whale blubber, narwhal tusks, polar bear hide and skulls, and walrus meat. However, these earnings rarely cover the full costs associated with hunting, such as fuel, cartridges, and boat maintenance. Economic hardships have led to adaptive financial strategies within the community. Hunters often lend and borrow from one another, exchanging meat for necessary supplies, such as seal meat for sled dog food in return for fuel or ammunition (Møller, personal communication, 2021). Given these financial strains, many hunters in Iserdor support acquiring a *qassaavik*, believing that mechanizing *qassaaneq* could enable them to process more sealskins for trade with Great Greenland, ultimately increasing their income. The women in the focus groups similarly expressed their support for bringing *qassaavik* to the community, emphasizing that it would alleviate the economic burden faced by hunters.

However, *qassaavik* is not the only technological in-

novation that has transformed sealskin production. Great Greenland has already introduced machinery that has replaced several practices historically carried out by women. In the past, women were responsible not only for *qassaaneq* but also for *qapiaaneq* (the fine scraping of fat residues) and drying the skins using an *innerfik*, a wooden frame that stretches the skin for drying (Lennert, 2021). With industrialized processing, these steps have been eliminated, leaving only rinsing, *qassaaneq*, and salting before skins are stored in freezers for sale. If a *qassaavik* were to be introduced, it would effectively eliminate the last remaining manual stage in sealskin preparation besides taking the skin off the seal, displacing generations of specialized knowledge that women have passed down.

From the perspective of Eurocentric modernity, one could argue that adopting *qassaavik* risks erasing elements of the indigeneity of Kalaallit, replacing local knowledge systems with mechanized efficiency. However, historical precedent suggests that Inuit have long embraced technological advancements to enhance survival and quality of life, as seen in the development of the *qimusseq* (Inuit sled) (Karetak et al., 2017). Thus, while mechanization may alter (Indigenous) Kalaallit knowledge systems, it does not necessarily sever Kalaallit technological innovation from its cultural roots. The potential environmental impact of increased sealskin production also remains constrained by logistical factors, such as freezer storage limitations and the availability of transportation for sealskin transport.

The CEO of Great Greenland is open to the idea of implementing *qassaavik*. However, several challenges must be addressed, as noted by the CEO. First, there are only few *qassaavik* machines left in the world, and no new ones are being produced. This presents a significant issue if a machine in a community were to break down, there would be no replacement parts or reserves available to repair it. Second, logistical difficulties arise in transporting the machine to remote locations where there are no vehicles capable of transporting it from the heliport to its final destination. Third, some remote areas lack running water, a requirement for operating the machine. Finally, Great Greenland has encountered communities with *qassaavik* that remain unused due to fear or reluctance to operate the machine. For these reasons, Great Greenland continues to advocate for sustaining the practice of *qassaaneq* (The then-CEO of Great Greenland, personal communication, 2021; The then-CEO of Great Greenland, personal communication, 2024).

Ultimately, the Iserdor community's vision for the future of sealskin production is shaped by both practical and cultural considerations. While mechanization offers a potential path to financial stability to sustain the hunting profession, it also raises profound questions about the preservation of practices that have been inherited for generations and the role of hunting in contemporary society. Whether or not *qassaavik* is introduced, the ongoing dialogue within Iserdor highlights a community actively negotiating its place in an evolving economic and political landscape.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the contemporary development of *qassaaneq* in Iserdor, exploring the theme of the fluidity and flexibility of gendered roles and changing socio-economic landscape. By centering the contemporary development of *qassaaneq* as the primary unit of analysis, this study captures the nuances of gendered labor and the Iserdor community's approach to sustaining and developing sealskin production. This challenges the dominant narrative that sealing practices are traditional and disconnected from modern society. The findings illustrate that a sealing practice such as *qassaaneq* remains a vital, evolving practice that adapts to contemporary needs. Historically performed by women, *qassaaneq* is projected to being taken up by hunters who are predominantly men, which illustrates the fluidity of gendered roles in the Kalaallit society in the context of sealskin production and development. While patriarchal narratives have obscured women's critical contributions to hunting practices, shifting gendered labor roles, socio-eco-

nomic changes, and possible technological advancements are only now raising critical questions about the future of women's involvement in sealskin production.

Moreover, this study reveals that the Iserdor community operates within a complex space shaped by both modern-colonial structures and their own worldview. While embedded in global neoliberal structures and labor markets, they assert their own organizational logic, resisting the rigid production targets characteristic of Western economic models. Instead of prioritizing profit maximization, the production flow follows the rhythm of *qassaasut* and aligns with the community's broader goal of sustaining their way of life as hunters in Iserdor. This challenges conventional management theories by demonstrating that work and organization can be structured around relational, adaptive, and community-driven principles rather than purely economic imperatives.

NOTES

[1] 'Isortoq' is the official, written name in Kalaallisut (official Greenlandic language). I choose to write 'Iserdor' to reflect how the locals spell their homeland.

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