

Inuit Myth and the Remaking of Greenland's Postcolonial Governance

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This article examines the conceptualization of nation-building in Greenland, challenging conventional views on sovereignty and suggesting an imminent emergence of an alternate governance model in the Arctic region. Drawing on the decoloniality perspective, we explore the Inuit myth, which suggests a unique connection of the Inuit to the Arctic environment and asserts their status as natural stewards of the region with special rights based on their cultural and political identity. We argue that this understanding of sovereignty has important implications not only for its departure from conventional Western notions of state formation but also for its potential to create alternative governance structures that do not reinforce existing political hegemonies from the "West". We further analyze how the legacy of colonialism in Greenland has impacted power and gender relations in the region and has fueled a distinctive sense of nationalism that differs from those seen in the West. The article discusses how the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is playing a major role in promoting an alternative political legitimacy model against the conventional approach of nation-building. We note that the ICC depends on the maintenance of political myths which have evolved over time. We conclude by suggesting that conventional perspectives on state formation must be revised to incorporate the historical experiences and knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and that further exploration of alternative governance structures is needed.

1. Introduction

This article examines the conceptualization of the Inuit's aspirations or lack thereof regarding state formation in Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat, in Greenlandic). We present the prevailing perspectives on state formation, contrasting them with an alternative understanding of sovereignty in Greenland. Additionally, we employ decoloniality theoretical perspectives to analyze the Greenlandic case. Specifically, we delve into the discussions surrounding the notion of the "Inuit myth," as outlined by Shadian (2010) and the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC)¹, which posits a unique Inuit connection to the Arctic's natural environment, endowing them with a natural stewardship role over the entire region. Consequently, this characteristic grants them distinctive

rights based on their political and cultural identity in the Arctic, thereby constructing a concept of non-state sovereignty or non-Westphalian sovereignty.

Consequently, our analysis aims to explore the potential divergence of this perspective from conventional interpretations of state formation and sovereignty, specifically within a non-Western framework. By considering the insights offered by decolonial and gender perspectives, we endeavor to enhance our understanding of this alternative conceptualization. The historical legacies of colonialism in Greenland have been studied by various scholars (e.g., Petersen, 1995; Petterson, 2016; Rud, 2017; Arnaut, 2021; Thisted, 2022). As with most colonization experiences in other parts of the world, the extraction of valuable natural resources from the colonies aimed at making the Kingdoms or Empires richer and increase their geopolitical power. However, the Danish colonization experience in Greenland also had an impact on power and gender relations in the territory. These postcolonial impacts affected the existing notion of self-determination in Greenland and heightened a sense of nationalism in a different way than in the western world.

The conventional view used to “compensate” postcolonial Indigenous societies (from colonial injustice and material and immaterial dispossession) has been through the idea of promoting self-determination through the formation of a nation-state. However, according to Shadian (2010), there are non-state or state-like identities contemplating international recognition that are not based on compensation in the form of a nation-state. Instead, self-determination is accomplished through other ways of political legitimacy. She argues that there is an “Inuit myth” which is a discourse that is not based on a national movement for statehood, or the traditional statehood Westphalian framework. The active role of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (hereafter ICC) in the Arctic is an example of this alternative governance.

Shadian (2010: 504) paraphrasing Stenbaek (1985: 9) argues that after all, “the aim of the ICC from its inception according to one ICC member was not for a new country but for a new consciousness”. The ICC depends on its ability to maintain the legitimacy of the political myths which over time have evolved, adapted, and changed into the Arctic myth. Kuokkanen (2019) argues that the current notion of Indigenous self-determination in the Arctic is incomplete because it ignores the concerns and political views of Indigenous women in the Arctic who are the ones that are most vulnerable to colonialism and its legacies due to gendered violence.

The discourse on modern state formation encompasses various perspectives, yet one significant aspect, as exposed by Mignolo (2007), often remains overlooked. Mignolo suggests that comprehending the colonial history and the experiences of Indigenous peoples should go beyond a simple understanding of their lives. It necessitates a critical examination of how we perceive their historical agency and their holistic comprehension of reality within the global context. Thus far, mainstream views on state formation have failed to adequately acknowledge the profound insights that can be gathered from Indigenous perspectives. This article is structured as follows: the ensuing section provides a brief overview of key prevalent perspectives on state formation, followed by relevant key concepts in relation to the type of sovereignties in context. The notion of the Inuit myth is presented in section 4, a discussion on Indigenous sovereignty in section 5, followed by a brief analysis of the decolonial approach and its relation to Greenland. The last section concludes.

2. A brief overview of prevalent views on state formation

The Inuit myth is a belief system centered around the idea of a special connection between the Inuit and the natural environment of the Arctic. Their perceived role in the Arctic may be viewed as an alternative governance framework, particularly in regions where traditional Indigenous customs and beliefs play a significant role in shaping decision-making and resource management. This highlights the influence of cultural and mythological narratives on governance structures and identities, which can have implications, albeit not inevitably, for state formation. Consequently, it is essential to deconstruct the origins of the concept of state formation, as it is not an inherent or universally applicable notion.

State formation is commonly used to describe “the long-term processes that led to the genesis of modern political domination in the form of the territorial sovereign state” (de Guevara and Lottholz, 2015). However, the concept itself may have different meanings given that it is believed that the idea of a state originated in Europe and spread out to other regions because of colonialism. These different meanings arise from a stark contrast between mainstream perspectives, which usually fail to account for the historical experiences of state formation in colonized regions, and their inadequate acknowledgment of the responsibilities by colonizers. Moreover, most of those perspectives neglect to recognize the distinct trajectory pursued by colonized regions in comparison to Western or imperial states. According to Weber’s definition, a State is “a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”. He argued that “a State is that human community which (successfully) lays claims to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory being another of the definition characteristics of the state” (Weber, 2004: 310-311).

Weber provided an explanation of the contemporary state as a *Herrschaftsverband*, which denotes an institutional association of rule. This entity has effectively established a monopoly over physical violence as a means of governing within a specific territory. To accomplish this objective, the state consolidates the material resources necessary for its operation and appropriates the authority previously held by various "estates." Consequently, the state assumes the role of the highest embodiment of power, supplanting these functionaries (Weber, 2004: 316). Weber's argument essentially suggests that the absence of violence as a tool for state enforcement would undermine societal order, potentially giving rise to a state of anarchy.

Weber and other prominent thinkers typically refer to the "early" period spanning from the 16th to the 18th century, as well as the "modern" era characterized by the proliferation of colonialism. Charles Tilly, renowned for his seminal work *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (1990: 5), raises the fundamental question of elucidating the reasons behind "the significant temporal and spatial disparities in the types of states that have prevailed in Europe since AD 990, and the eventual convergence of European states into diverse variants of national states." Tilly argues that state development primarily resulted from the actions of the power elite, who imposed taxes on the common populace in order to finance warfare and territorial conquest. Consequently, he suggests that cities and countries in the 15th-16th century were primarily established as defensive entities to safeguard against the ravages of war. This development was largely motivated by the exigencies of warfare.

Tilly's work is frequently associated with the aphorism "the state makes war and war makes states." Essentially, his primary argument asserts that the foundation of a contemporary state centers upon its capacity to impose taxation upon the populace within its jurisdiction. These fiscal resources, in turn, facilitate the state's sustained engagement in warfare, enabling the acquisition of additional territories and the lawful compulsion of greater numbers of individuals to participate in these military campaigns. Tilly suggests that international territorial competition and resource scarcity drive colonial expansion. While he considers that non-European countries may not replicate Europe's state formation pattern, he argues that European variations can provide insights into state formation and warfare in non-European contexts (Tilly, 1990: 16). This characterization has been utilized by scholars to understand state formation globally, but it faces criticism. For example, the British sociologist Michael Mann in *The Sources of Social Power* (1986) stresses the importance of social relations and ideologies in shaping state formation. For him, nation-building cannot be solely attributed to coercion and military force. He identifies four primary sources of social power that interact in complex ways in shaping state-building: ideological, economic, military, and political. Yet, for Mann, ideological factors assume a significant role as a source of power. He argues that ideology constitutes one of the principal foundations of social power that contributes to the process of state formation. Mann insists that ideologies, such as nationalism, religious convictions, and political doctrines, serve as moral and normative frameworks that give legitimacy upon state authority while promoting collective mobilization (Mann, 1986: 307-319).

However, if ideologies are social constructions, then nations and states are not natural entities, but they are "imagined" by their members. This is what Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006). According to Anderson, print capitalism played a pivotal role in shaping modern nations and states. He argues that the development of vernacular languages, the expansion of printing press technology, and the widespread accessibility of printed materials contributed to the creation of a shared cultural space (Anderson, 2006: 46). This space allowed people to envision themselves as members of a larger community beyond their immediate social circles. Anderson also emphasizes the significance of nationalism in the process of state building. He suggests that the dissemination of print capitalism played a key role in fostering national consciousness, as people began to identify with and imagine themselves as part of a distinct nation characterized by shared symbols, myths, and narratives (Anderson, 2006: 204). This sense of belonging and collective identity, nurtured through the notion of imagined communities, facilitated the establishment of nation-states.

Yet, those "imagined communities" would not exist without changes in social organization, technology, and institutions that gave rise to the shared space that Anderson was referring to. This constitutes what Anthony Giddens identifies as the phenomenon of modernity. For him, the aforementioned changes gave rise to industrial capitalism and the Enlightenment as argued in *The Nation-State and Violence* (1985). Giddens emphasizes the transformative effects of modernity on various aspects of society, including the state. He argues that modernity, characterized by industrialization, urbanization, and global interconnections, has led to a fundamental reconfiguration of social and political structures, and thus the functioning of a nation-state.

However, most of these perspectives have tended to underestimate the significant influence of colonialism in shaping social identities, ideologies, institution-building, and warfare on state formation. Scholars such as Chatterjee (1993) and Bhambra (2018) present a different viewpoint

that challenges the mainstream understanding of the nation-state. According to this view, the notion of a nation-state only becomes relevant in the aftermath of the emergence of colonial or imperial states. This argument posits that historically powerful nations like Germany and England, for instance, attained wealth and political power through colonization. Bhambra contends that the wealth of colonizer states was not limited to their original territories but derived from the countries they colonized. Consequently, she calls into question Weber's conceptualization of the modern state, which is based on the contemporary German state defined by its national boundaries. Yet, the construction of the 'national state' was concurrent with, and indeed constituted by, its associated imperial activities" (Bhambra, 2018: 4). It is argued that this conventional way of understanding nation state, which is also used by mainstream scholars, often disregards the fact that "the actions of the state upon populations outside its self-defined parameters and towards whom there is no relationship of emerging equality, only of domination" (Bhambra, 2018: 4).

Chatterjee (1993) and Bhambra (2018) invite for a reconsideration of the concept of the nation-state through the lenses of colonialism and imperialism looking to understand history from a much broader perspective. Bhambra in particular mentions as an example how Britain started to be regarded as a "failed state" in the mid-twentieth century because of the legislative policies making its citizens into immigrants on the basis on a racial hierarchy. Bhambra concludes by arguing that without a new way of understanding state formation, we exclude the "darker" citizens outside the world history, that in the case of Britain, it discusses citizenship without acknowledging that "England acquired colonies prior to Union and continued their colonial conquests after Union, and so they were already imperial states prior to becoming a conjoined nation-state" (Bhambra 2018: 8).

Nevertheless, in hindsight, the mainstream views on state formation, and even the post-colonial perspectives of Chatterjee (1993) and Bhambra (2018) downplay the role of diverse epistemologies, the ways of knowing, and knowledge production of former colonies and societies after the crafting of the idea of a state. The Argentinian scholar, Walter D. Mignolo, known for his decolonial approach, argues that coloniality (i.e., the enduring colonial power structures and systems of domination) is the result of western modernity (Mignolo, 2007). For Mignolo, the idea of a nation-state is an element that western modernity has imposed. The current idea of knowledge and science disregards other perspectives that are not western aligned. Thus, he proposes to academics and non-academics to decolonize knowledge, "delinking" it from the western notion of totality. Totality is the imposed knowledge that preconditions the way of understanding reality, and that the idea of the nation state is one of these imposed realities. Coloniality imposes a matrix of power that persuades individuals to believe that scientific truth can only be attained through specific methodologies. Mignolo contends that alternative histories and civilizations, particularly precolonial ones, offer different perspectives on reality and diverse understandings of societal organization. These non-colonized societies experienced distinct ways of comprehending the world, challenging the dominant narrative that upholds Western methodologies as the sole source of scientific truth. He proposes to delink from the western epistemology and go towards a change in the terms of conversation, and this "new" understanding will bring a change in economics, politics, philosophy, and ethics. That is, by including other ways of thinking about the truth and reality. Overall, he argues that the idea of an imperial nation state is also a western imposition that leads to nationalism and further international inequalities and the perpetuation of the colonial matrix of power.

Undoubtedly, new scholarly perspectives on state formation should emphasize the need to move beyond a Western lens and consider the histories and perspectives of colonized countries and cultures. Failing to acknowledge non-Western history limits our understanding of the diverse processes of state formation. While the issue of colonialism is present in these key perspectives, there is a distinction in how it is addressed. The warfare perspective, imagined communities, and institutional building approaches do not sufficiently consider the experiences of colonial subjects as valuable sources of knowledge. In contrast, Bhambra's viewpoint encourages learning from the perspectives of the colonized. Additionally, Mignolo argues that it is insufficient to merely include colonial subjects; a decolonization of knowledge is necessary to reframe our understanding. This calls for a critical examination of the ways in which we approach and interpret colonial histories.

3. Exploring Arctic Sovereignty: Unraveling Concepts

Following the brief overview of the prevalent views on state formation, it is important to begin to disentangle the concepts or ideas of sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty, non-Westphalian sovereignty, Indigenous sovereignty, as well as their interplay for the context of Greenland. For this, we rely on the notion of the so-called “Inuit myth” in order to show the different understandings of Arctic sovereignty and how the decolonial perspectives are related to it. The Inuit myth is a belief system that establishes a deep connection between the Inuit people and their natural environment. This belief system has significant implications for their sovereignty because it asserts that the Inuit have a unique historical claim to the Arctic region, and therefore, a voice regarding the land, its resources, and its governance. The connection between this belief system and sovereignty implies that the Inuit should have a recognized role in shaping policies that affect their communities and territories. Conventional literature rarely draws direct connections between sovereignty and belief systems. Hence, it is of particular relevance to examine this interplay, especially within the specific context of Greenland and the Arctic.

The concept of sovereignty has evolved throughout history, and it has been adapted to political circumstances and actors. The Treaty of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War and institutionalized the concept of sovereignty in Europe (in a Westphalian way). Sovereign states were then recognized as the most important political institutions. The term “Westphalian” includes the sovereignty to act independently as a territorial statehood within a particular geopolitical arrangement (Opello and Rosow, 2004: 79). Accordingly, the state was then represented by a King or a Queen, a dictator or a democratically elected government, and the state could, without interference of other states, claim control over the affairs within its territorial boundaries. If the sovereignty of other states is respected, the state was also entitled to manage its external affairs (Bauder and Mueller, 2021).

The term sovereignty is not a rigid term, on the contrary, it has been an evolving concept that has been often contested. In political theory, sovereignty is more of a functional way to legitimize authority while in international law it is related to the ability to exert power by a state. In general, it has been commonly defined the way Werner and de Wilde (2001: 3) describe it as “the absolute and independent authority of a community or nation both internally and externally”. There are mainly two ways of conceptualizing sovereignty from which additional variants of them arise. The two ways are the so-called *de jure sovereignty* and *de facto sovereignty*. The first one (*de jure*) is considered when there is an articulated and institutionally recognized right to control a territory, or as Lee (1996) describes it as “the right to command”. It is also referred to as legal sovereignty. As for the

de facto sovereignty is the “ability to command”, which is sometimes referred to as coercive sovereignty.

Krasner (2004), argues that sovereignty can also be divided in three ways: *Domestic*, *International legal*, and *Westphalian*. Regarding domestic sovereignty it refers to the institutions in which a particular state is governed, and whether this can provide security, prosperity and justice to the people that live under that state. For international legal sovereignty, Krasner refers to it as the ability to be recognized juridically by independent territorial entities. As for Westphalian, and as mentioned earlier in this section, Krasner (2004: 1077) states that this is the characteristic when the state has the right to independently determine its own institutions of government and there is no other authority in the state aside from the domestic sovereign and the principle of no intervention in the internal affairs of other states applies.

However, non-European societies, particularly colonized societies may have a different way to understand sovereignty, thus, many various authors and international institutions have argued that because of the struggle for recognition of the culture and language of colonized people, the term sovereignty should be re-examined. For example, the Inuit Circumpolar Council has stated in a Declaration on Sovereignty the following:

“For Inuit living within the states of Russia, Canada, the USA and Denmark/Greenland, issues of sovereignty must be examined and assessed in the context of our long history of struggle to gain recognition and respect as an Arctic indigenous people having the right to exercise self-determination over our lives, territories, cultures, and languages” (ICC declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic, 2009).

This is especially relevant because the regions that were occupied underwent a process of colonization aimed at altering their culture and the organizational structures of their societies. Also, there is a key element present when a country occupies and colonizes a territory: the psychological element also called *animus occupandi*, that is, the intention to control and occupy a territory in order to get sovereignty over it (Wallace and Martin-Ortega, 2020: 100)

Therefore, it can be said that the 2007 UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) that asserted the right of self-determination of Indigenous peoples represented a step towards the emancipation from the colonial control of Westphalian sovereign states. In particular, article 5 states:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State”.

It is then important to define the term colony in the context of state formation in occupied territories. There are various definitions of “colony” but a general definition in international law of a colony refers to a “dependent territorial entity subject to the sovereignty of an independent country, but considered part of that country for purposes of relations with third countries” (US Legal, 2022).

Colonization is an important element to understand state formation in occupied or formerly occupied societies. It is crucial to differentiate between the terms “postcoloniality” and

"decoloniality" in order to gain clarity for our ensuing arguments. Postcolonialism, or postcoloniality, does not refer to the time period following colonialism; rather, it encompasses the enduring legacy of colonial rule on the subjugated populations and examines how people respond to this legacy. It primarily focuses on describing and understanding the issues stemming from colonialism within local communities that have experienced occupation. Decoloniality is the approach that seeks to challenge and dismantle the ongoing effects of colonialism and its legacies. Particularly it looks to undo the conscious and unconscious prevalent bias that western knowledge is superior to Indigenous knowledge. Decoloniality is concerned with actively addressing and resolving issues such as social class and gender inequalities, that persist in postcolonial communities.

It seems then that both terms, postcoloniality and decoloniality, are addressing an issue that the reviewed concepts of sovereignty are ignoring, that is the dispossessed local communities. Sovereignty can be quite different than previous mainstream views on state formation and the capacity of the state to exert control. This concern is expressed in a policy paper from the ICC published in 2020:

“Similar to other attempts to lump Indigenous peoples into other collective terms is problematic because the term “local” does not account for Indigenous peoples who have been removed from their lands and discounts the particular circumstances of Inuit... These actions are part of an alarming trend in the behavior of States to diminish the standards in the U.N. Declaration, including actions to devalue Indigenous peoples’ status, rights and participation rather than upholding their responsibilities and uplifting the status, rights and participation of Indigenous peoples” (ICC Policy Paper, 2020: 3)

The previous quoted paragraph points out that other sovereign states tend to undermine the 2007 UNDRIP. However, Kuokkanen (2019) questions the different interpretations of sovereignty in the Arctic, arguing that the concept of self-determination contained in the UNDRIP (and as indicated in article 5), it is an idea of sovereignty that is inherently Westphalian. Thus, she coined the term *Indigenous Westphalian Sovereignty*, which she argues is the case of Greenland.

On the other hand, Shadian (2010) argues that the creation of non-state sovereignty in the Arctic is based on a notion of Inuit nationalism relying on an entity greater than any other state achieving legitimacy via a *myth* that consists of seeing the Inuit as Indigenous stewards across the circumpolar region. This is a case of *non-Westphalian sovereignty*.

4. The Inuit Myth

Inuit mythology is vast across the Arctic (for example, in Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region) but it is especially in Greenland where storytelling plays an important role in transmitting cultural symbolism and beliefs. In these, there are repeatedly spiritual tales where nature plays a key element when describing how the Inuit view the environment that they live in.

There is a common belief that Greenlanders have lived according to the laws of nature, spiritual principles, and mythical characters such as the Greenlandic Shamans (or *Angakkeut* in Greenlandic). The Shamans are central figures in the mythology of Greenland, as they are said to interpret the will of the higher powers. Another emblematic figure in Greenlandic mythology is the Mother of

the Sea, *Sassuma Arnaa*. The Mother of the Sea is an integral part of Greenlandic cultural history and today is powerful symbol of marine pollution and global warming of the ocean for the Inuit (Bach-Kreutzmann, 2018). According to the myth (of the Mother of the Sea), when the Inuit breaks a taboo in society, the hair of *Sassuma Arnaa* gets dirty entangling the animals and prevents the hunters and fishers from catching any food (Bach-Kreutzmann, 2018: 108). As a consequence, to untangle the animals, a Shaman has to go into the bottom of the Ocean to communicate with *Sassuma Arnaa* and find out what taboos were broken, ultimately spreading the messages and lessons back to society (Sonne, 2017: 135).

These prominent local mythologies serve as a reflection of how Greenlandic identity and ethnicity are deeply intertwined with the natural world. As exemplified by the myth of *Sassuma Arnaa*, the challenges faced by communities may originate from within themselves and potentially have mystical remedies, but the common denominator is the harmonic relation with the natural environment. Moreover, many Greenlanders hold the belief that they do not possess ownership over the land they inhabit; instead, they perceive themselves as temporary custodians, borrowing the land from their ancestors. This sense of responsibility compels them to treat the land with respect and assume the role of stewards (Harrop et al., 2022).

An external observer to the Arctic may perceive the connection between Arctic nature and Greenlanders' identity as a recent phenomenon. Yet, the Inuit have inhabited the Arctic for several millennia. Historical accounts from printed media (e.g., a longstanding newspaper named *Atuagagdlitit*) show that, West Greenlanders had a well-defined ethnic identity from the beginning of the 1860s, where hunting and kayaking played a significant role in cultural awareness, and they constituted a unified whole as arctic peoples (Langgård, 1998).

Sara Olsvig, the current International Chair of the ICC, mentions the following in a recent speech:

“As you know, Inuit live across the borders of four nation states, across our homeland, Inuit Nunaat. We were divided by these state borders, and it took our collective and hard efforts to reach the place we have been since 1992, when ICC Chukotka finally became a full member party to our organization, uniting Russian Inuit with our Alaskan, Canadian and Kalaallit family. Just like our languages, our cultures, our identity as Inuit, - our surroundings; the environment, the changing climate, our ecosystems, and biodiversity, know nothing of borders. [...] As we have said many times, protecting to Arctic is to protect the planet. These days, this saying has much further reaching reality – not only being about climate and our environment, but also being about democracy”. [...] We are spiritually connected to our surroundings, and we are spiritually connected across Inuit Nunaat.” (Sara Olsvig, Keynote Speech, UArctic, 2023).

In a similar fashion in relation to the deep relationship between the Inuit and their ancestral lands, the late ICC founding member, Eben Hopson in one his earliest speeches addressing the oil and gas industry, depicts the Inuit as a nation and not a nation-state:

“We (the Inuit) are an international community sharing common language, culture, and a common land along the Arctic coast of Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Although not a nation-state, as a people, we do constitute a nation” (Eben Hopson, Official Speech, 1978.)

Shadian (2006) reflects on the ICC positions on sovereignty and argues that the aforementioned myths related to the human-natural environment have evolved into political myths and structures uncovering a type of sovereignty based on symbolic meanings and not on territory. Thus, the Inuit myth is the Inuit collective identity and cultural heritage that serves as a basis for political sovereignty. Accordingly, the Inuit myth is portrayed as a means to exercise sovereignty, which is not necessarily dependent on achieving statehood or taking part in mainstream international organizations. Rather, the legitimacy of their political myth or the ongoing historical myth of an Inuit collective identity within the realm of global politics is what enables the Inuit to exercise their political autonomy. Although, Shadian's notion of the Inuit myth might initially emanate from the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, it is understood that the collective identity refers to the traditional homeland and ancestral territory of the Inuit Nunaat (Inuit land, in Greenlandic), or Inuit Nunangat (Inuit land, in Inuktitut). According to this assessment, "a new framework by which a transnational Inuit myth acquired its role as a legitimate stakeholder in Arctic development. The underlying structure of this collective myth, the idea of the Inuit as indigenous with particular rights; the natural stewards of the Arctic, would remain a dominant aspect of this new polity" (Shadian 2006: 196).

Yet, the evolving concept of stewardship, whereby Indigenous peoples assume responsibilities as stewards of the land and resources but not as its owners. This might seem like a conflicting aspect of the framework and clashes with other conceptualizations of sovereignty. According to international law, Indigenous peoples are recognized as right-holders rather than stakeholders (e.g., United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169). Still, following the Inuit myth view, the Inuit are natural stewards of the land which does not equate to landowners, but it gives them the exclusive right (thus, right-holder) to the land and key element in decision-making processes.

In this context, the concept of non-Westphalian sovereignty (also referred to as post-Westphalian sovereignty) comes into play. In the subsequent section, we delve into an examination of how this perspective diverges from the conventional understanding of sovereignty.

5. Non-Westphalian sovereignty and Indigenous Westphalian sovereignty

Thus far, it is evident that mainstream perspectives on sovereignty, which rely on a clearly delineated territory and a militaristic entity, may not adequately capture the complexities of Arctic Indigenous societies' pursuit of self-determination. As mentioned in the previous section, the Inuit myth relies on a collective identity that may not focus entirely on statehood. For example, for Greenland is highly unlikely, though not entirely impossible, to employ institutionalized violence as a means of exerting control over its geographical territory. Consequently, one might argue that this case exemplifies a clear instance of non-Westphalian sovereignty. Nonetheless, there are characteristics of the Westphalian sovereignty that are taking place currently in Greenland that can be outlined as Indigenous Westphalian sovereignty. Thus, it is imperative to elucidate the distinctions between these concepts.

Shadian (2006) argues that resource development in the Arctic was fundamental to the process by which the Inuit were able to: "reframe their historical myth in a contemporary setting—Arctic indigenous stewards through a codified organization—the Inuit Circumpolar Council". She goes on to say that the "Inuit collective political identity points to an emerging post-Westphalian reality where sovereignty is shifting from the state to new collective identities. Yet, this new political

architecture needs more than a myth in order to be political; it needs to be legitimized and realized through political institutions.”

Thus, Shadian places an important characteristic in trying to define non-Westphalian (or post-Westphalian) from the orthodoxy of a Westphalian sovereignty. A non-Westphalian view covers the Inuit myth or the symbolism of Inuit values (belonging to the arctic nature) which is not based on territoriality. Nevertheless, this needs to be legitimized by political institutions. For this, the ICC plays a role of a “supranational” political institution to legitimize Indigenous sovereignty. The conventional view of Westphalian sovereignty grants nation states controls not only of their internal but also of their external affairs. Thus, in a non-Westphalian sovereignty, external control is not necessary. This idea can be summarized in a speech from the ICC founder Eben Hopson in 1978:

“An important objective of our Inuit land claims movement is the organization of local government in the Arctic. I personally feel this organization must happen within the national context and traditions of Denmark, Canada and the United States. Some may talk about separate Inuit political development, but I do not. All we need is the cooperation of our governments to enable us to make traditional North American local government work for us in the Arctic” (Hopson, 1978).

On the other hand, Kuokkanen (2019), contends this framework, contrasting this position by arguing that the 2009 Greenland Self-Government Act was a significant step towards securing exclusive subsurface rights to its territory and political independence. She claims that given that political independence requires economic self-sufficiency, Greenlanders are then advancing their own form of “Westphalian indigenous sovereignty” based on the vision of a self-sufficient state.

However, Koukkanen (2019) does not claim that this is the only prevalent view. She argues that in Greenland there are two different discourses of sovereignty. One is aligned to the ICC which is the “shared, overlapping sovereignties emerging from the global Indigenous self-determination movement” (Koukkanen, 2019: 315), and the other is the Westphalian discourse, which represented by the Greenlandic Parliament and the Self-Government, and which seeks emancipation from the Danish Kingdom as an ultimate objective as is stated in the Self-Government Act of 2009 in reference to political independence.

Kuokkannen uses a metaphor brought by the former Greenlandic Prime Minister Aleqqa Hammond. Hammond was quoted in interview (April 11, 2013) saying that she sees Greenland like an airplane, “on the one wing lies all the traditions, the culture, language, and values. On the other wing is the global influence and interaction with various partners (Koukkanen, 2019: 315).

Determining the prevailing perspective on sovereignty in Greenland's contemporary political milieu is challenging due to the region's notable regional variations in social and economic dynamics. In Nuuk, where the majority of the population resides alongside the central public administration, prominent private enterprises, the social elite, and Danish settlers, the political outlook of the public differs from that of smaller towns and settlements. This contrast is evident in the voting outcomes of past national elections.

In general, smaller towns often exhibit a preference for political parties that espouse traditional values and claim to represent Inuit ideals, such as nationalist left-wing parties like Siumut and Naleraq. Conversely, larger towns and the capital tend to lean towards liberal or progressive-left

parties like Demokratiit and Inuit Ataqatigiit. Notably, Siumut-led governments have historically displayed a proactive approach towards attaining economic self-sufficiency, often through the expansion of the mining industry via the granting of mineral mining exploitation licenses. These governmental efforts can be seen as aligning with a notion of sovereignty rooted in indigenous Westphalian sovereignty. Presently, the Inuit Ataqatigiit-led government, in a coalition, expresses a desire for independence, although not in a hasty manner, but rather in accordance with principles rooted in climate global agenda, Indigenous self-determination, and the values upheld by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC).

In the international sphere, Greenland is not a marginalized regional actor anymore. The current trend reveals Greenland's empowerment as regional actor asserting its claims in the Arctic. A proof of this are the dynamics of Greenland's foreign policy and its capacity for self-determination as the country progressively assumes the role of a partner to the United States, all the while navigating its ongoing relations with Denmark. The pursuit of self-determination has influenced the trilateral dynamics with Denmark, and the United States (Olsvig, 2022). Consequently, the concept of Indigenous sovereignty in Greenland oscillates between interpretations within the framework of Westphalian sovereignty and alternative, non-Westphalian (or post-Westphalian) perspectives.

6. How does decoloniality contribute to understanding sovereignty in Greenland?

Following the conclusion of the Second World War, the United Nations exerted pressure on Denmark to acknowledge Greenland as a territory inhabited by individuals aspiring for self-determination. Consequently, Denmark's recognition implied an admission that Greenland retained its status as a colony, despite Denmark's attempts to present itself as a generous or "good" colonizer. Indeed, a prevailing narrative suggests that Denmark is often characterized as a relatively "mild" colonizer (Alfredsson, 1982: 307). Nevertheless, the perception of the colonialist as benign and compassionate has come under scrutiny due to documented instances of colonial injustices, such as discriminatory birthplace wage criteria from 1953 to 1991, the social experiment of relocating Greenlandic children to Denmark in the 1950s, cases involving fatherless children, and the mid-1960s contraception campaign known as the "Spiral case" when Danish authorities instructed doctors and health specialists to place thousands of intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUD) on Greenlandic girls and women without consent, among other illustrative examples of colonial or postcolonial injustice (Sermitsiaq, 2022, May 12th).

According to some authors (e.g., Rud, 2018: 6), there is a colonial social hierarchy in Greenland that sees western foreigners (mostly Danes) as the "advanced ones" with the "modern" skills while local Indigenous people are seen as primitive. This hierarchy still exists today in Greenland, but it is informal and disguised in various ways. The "soft" former colonizer within the Danish Kingdom relies on the use of non-violent methods to gain control and power over the societies of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The former Faroe Islands' head minister Høgni Hoydal refers to Benedict Anderson in a speech in a convention about "rethinking Nordic colonialism" called "Neo-Colonialism with a human face – the cozy self-colonization in Danish home rule". Høgni Hoydal refers, in the conference, to an interview that a Danish newspaper had with Benedict Anderson. In the newspaper interview Benedict Anderson was quoted for saying "All the historians know that Denmark was once an empire, but as I understand it is not something you could learn about in

school. Instead, they learn about this friendly little harmless nation and its nice people” (Høgni, 2006: 2).

In relation to this, the Greenlandic anthropologist Aviaja E. Lynge (2006), argues:

“We have always been taught we were one of the best colonies in the world. No slavery, no killings. We learned it through Danish history books, and from Danish teachers. With the books telling us how fantastic a colony we were – books about primitive Eskimos, books written from Euro-centric, economic, or self-justifying angles – we haven’t really looked beyond this historical oppression [...]. We went directly from being a colony into becoming a part of Denmark. We learned to be Danish, and we learned to be thankful. Why, then, should we have had a reason to decolonize? And why should we have a reason to ask questions about the 250 years of colonial presence?” (Lynge 2006: 1).

“The question remains if one can discuss colonization in such terms as ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Is it better to take bodies or to take souls?” (Lynge, 2006: 6)

These quotes from Lynge (2006) point out in general the rhetorical question of why should Greenland have a reason to decolonize if Denmark brought Greenland within the Kingdom and as a consequence it stopped being colony? The answer that she is trying to put forward is the one given by decolonial theory. Decoloniality in a nutshell, stands for the idea that even though colonialism has ended in most parts of the world, the “coloniality of power” continues to characterize relations between the West and the “Rest”.

This phenomenon of coloniality of power is present in Greenland. As Rud (2017) has argued, Danish colonization in the nineteenth century attempted to erase Inuit social relations and establish a new governance and sovereignty different from what it already existed in Greenland. Williamson (2011), claims that Danish colonialism also changed gender relations. Before the arrival of the Danish colonial mission, Greenlandic society was genderless, that is, there was a certain indifference to gender and the absence of a hierarchy of male dominance or female subordination. In this regard, Lugones (2007), a feminist decolonial theorist, argues that gender did not exist as a principle of power in Indigenous societies before colonization. Thus, according to her, gender is a colonial construct. Building in these ideas, Koukkanen (2019) insists that the materialization of Indigenous self-determination cannot be seen only as an end through the creation of Greenlandic Self-Government. She explains that women’s community issues in Greenland, like gendered violence, should be part of the “hard issues” (land rights and natural resources) and not framed as soft issues when building a new type of governance under an Indigenous notion of sovereignty.

This is because even though Greenlandic women historically have been at the forefront of the struggle for Indigenous self-determination, they have been subjugated and marginalized in a patriarchal system that stemmed from Danish colonialism.

To advance towards an inclusive idea of sovereignty, Mignolo (2017) proposes “decentering” and “delinking” political Indigenous structures from western knowledge. But Mignolo (2017) also warn us:

“...there cannot be one and only one decolonial master plan – that would be far too modern, too Eurocentric, too provincial, too limited and still too universal. Decoloniality operates on pluri-versality and truth and not in universality and truth.

As mentioned above, decoloniality's first moves should be those of delinking. Secondly, it should strive for re-existence. Re-existing is something other than resisting. If you resist, you are trapped in the rules of the game others created, specifically the narrative and promises of modernity and the necessary implementation of coloniality."

The case of Greenland underscores a valuable lesson derived from the decolonial discourse, elucidating that the trajectory of political developments oscillates between a non-Westphalian conception of sovereignty and an Indigenous Westphalian framework. However, it is imperative to recognize that Indigenous self-determination in the Arctic is not governed by a universal blueprint, necessitating a departure from the notion of a "one size fits all" approach. Drawing upon Mignolo's conceptualizations of decoloniality, Greenlanders are encouraged to embrace a paradigm of "re-existing" or remaking rather than mere resistance, placing Indigenous knowledge production at the forefront. This transformative process engenders a continuous emergence of novel forms of autonomous indigenous governance.

7. Conclusion

The title of this article "Inuit Myth and the Remaking of Greenland's Postcolonial Governance" may be deemed somewhat farfetched, principally in regard to the term "remaking" which could be seen as a need for Greenland to reconstruct itself. However, it is important to acknowledge that Greenland does not require a rebuilding but rather an assertion of self-determination, resilience, and re-existence, as advocated by Mignolo's decolonial approach. Our article has showed that the concept of sovereignty has been a subject of considerable debate within mainstream literature (e.g., Tilly 1990, Weber 2004, and Bhambra 2018), as well as in emerging perspectives on Indigenous sovereignty, where the absence of a universally applicable model becomes evident. Greenland's historical trajectory includes triumphing over colonization and resisting Danish assimilation attempts, culminating in its transformation into an influential political actor that significantly impacts both Arctic and global governance dynamics.

We have presented Shadian's argument on the Inuit myth, which posits that the collective perception of the Inuit, depicting them as Indigenous people with distinct rights and serving as natural stewards of the Arctic, is strategically employed to politically legitimize the right of self-determination. This legitimization process is facilitated through the utilization of a "supranational" institution, namely the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which serves as a means to advance the pursuit of self-determination goals within the political sphere.

Our examination has revealed a contestation of the prevailing notion of non-Westphalian sovereignty, propagated through the Inuit myth, across the Arctic region. Greenland, in particular, stands out as a prominent actor challenging this established understanding of sovereignty. The enactment of the 2009 Self-Government Act in Greenland serves as a concrete manifestation of a distinct form of sovereignty, termed Indigenous Westphalian sovereignty by Koukkanen (2021). While this variant does not align with the traditional Westphalian model due to its lack of authority over external affairs (despite provisions for potential future advancement), it asserts its influence domestically.

We briefly discussed the oscillating or alternating nature of the political landscape in Greenland, which involves a dynamic interplay between these divergent notions of sovereignty, ranging from

non-Westphalian to Indigenous Westphalian perspectives. Moreover, we engaged in an exploration of the utility of decolonial approaches, such as Mignolo's (2007) framework, in facilitating openness to new local understandings of sovereignty in the Arctic context. These approaches question the adoption of imported notions regarding state-building and the establishment of predetermined paths for state formation.

In conclusion, we align with Mignolo's perspective, emphasizing the importance of promoting an ethos of "re-existing" rather than merely "resisting." Central to this approach is the prioritization of Indigenous knowledge production, which should be situated at the forefront of discussions on sovereignty, recognizing its crucial role in shaping Arctic dynamics.

Notes

1. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) was founded in 1977 to represent and advocate for the rights and interests of 185,000 Inuit from Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka. It operates through a governing body known as the General Assembly, which consists of delegates from each of the Inuit regions it represents. The elected leadership works collectively to advance the interests of Inuit communities and ensure their perspectives are heard.

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