

# Inuit Tattoos in Greenland Today: A Marker of Cultural Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** For years, Greenland has been under Danish colonial rule, which has left the Indigenous People of Greenland with trauma that still haunts them today. The search for identity that has left many young Inuit angry and confused has been difficult to express. Many young Inuit have chosen to use traditional tattoos to heal and strengthen themselves, to show that they are Inuit, to show that they are Kalaallit (Greenlanders). This phenomenon has been seen in Indigenous communities around the world who have experienced similar colonial violence. This essay focusses mainly on the young Inuit from Nuuk, but also discusses the Inuit from Nunavut.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Les années de domination coloniale danoise au Groënland ont causés des traumatismes qui hantent encore aujourd'hui les peuples autochtones du Groenland. La recherche d'identité qui a laissé de nombreux jeunes Inuits confus et en colère a été difficile à exprimer. De nombreux jeunes Inuits ont choisis d'utiliser les tatouages traditionnels pour guérir et renforcer leur sens d'eux-mêmes, pour montrer qu'ils sont Inuits, pour montrer qu'ils sont Kalaallit (Groenlandais). Ce phénomène a été observés à travers le monde dans les communautés autochtones qui ont expérimenté une violence coloniale similaire. Cet essai se concentre principalement sur les jeunes Inuits de Nuuk, mais parle également des Inuits de Nunavu.

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Figure 1: Pani Enequist (right) and her husband, Sebastian Enequist (left), after receiving their Inuit tattoos.  
Photographer: Paninnguaq Lind Jensen.

A line on the chin that makes one more Greenlandic. Many young adults, especially women, have been getting Inuit tattoos, whether on their face or on their body. This phenomenon of young people bringing back a tradition that has been used in Greenland, Canada, and Alaska is very new, but I doubt that it is for the same reasons that young people get their faces and bodies tattooed as they did in the past. I have Inuit tattoos myself, which is one of the reasons for my great interest in knowing what motivates other people's decisions to get tattoos. This article will try to answer the following questions using interviews, a questionnaire, and informal conversations:

1. Why did these young Greenlanders choose to have Inuit tattoos?
2. Are these tattoos an expression of their Inuit identity?
3. Has the colonization of Greenland been one of the reasons why some young people in Greenland have chosen to revive an old tattoo tradition?
4. Who is allowed to have these tattoos?

The big identity question whether one is Greenlandic or Danish has probably been on the minds of many Greenlanders, since Greenland has been through a period of colonization as well as very rapid modernization. People's statements have made me think of Thomas Hylland Eriksen's book *Små steder - Store spørgsmål*,

especially Chapter 18, which discusses “Nationalisme og Minoriteter” (Eriksen 2010). The book has a section that talks about how, as Indigenous People, you have to try to keep your traditions alive when you feel threatened by another party. In this case, it is Greenland who feels that its traditions are threatened by the colonizer, Denmark.

My decision to get my own Inuit tattoos started with watching the documentary *Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos* (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). The documentary follows Alethea Arnaquq-Baril’s quest to revitalize her own cultural heritage with a focus on Inuit tattoos. This moving documentary was a catalyst for my choice to get my own Inuit tattoos. In addition to being one of the many young people in Nuuk who has gotten Inuit tattoos, one also thinks as a researcher about the reason others have for getting these tattoos.

## The Longing for the Ancient Traditions

While looking at a Facebook page called *Inuit Tattoo Traditions* (Jacobsen and Jensen 2018), I found an emotional essay written by Inuit author Maya Sialuk Jacobsen, who has distinctive Inuit face tattoos. The essay is called “Ancestral threads” and starts by discussing how Greenlanders have been told over and over again that their language and way of life had no future and that they should be more civilized and Danish. Maya used words like “Us” and “I” to show that she is a part of it as she sees herself as Inuk. However, she does not feel that she is just Greenlandic, but part of the entire Arctic Inuit population. She herself grew up being assimilated into another culture, being brought up like a Dane in Greenland. But she always knew that she was not Danish. She found a small mask from the Dorset culture (see Figure 2), a migration of people to Greenland, before the Thule culture. Maya herself says that she is a descendant of the Thule culture.



Figure 2 left: Jacobsen, Maya Sialuk, (2019) *Ancestral Threads* (Maskette, Devon Island, Nunavut ca. 1900–1600 BC. Walrus ivory, 5.4 cm x 2.9 cm x 8 mm. Collection Canadian Museum of History). Figure 2 right: Unknown title, Nordqvist, Jørgen et al. (1991, 103; ©Greenland National Museum).

A 3600-year-old mask had made Maya feel a sense of pride in her culture. Although not a descendant of the Dorset culture, she could see a similarity between the Dorset and the Thule culture, as the mask she talks about also had the same lines on her face as the 500-year-old Qilakitsoq mummies also have (see Figure 2 right). She even thought that this mask had exactly the same lines as Inuit women today have: “Her chin lines are exactly the same as the lines I tattoo on Inuit women today: precise straight lines from lip to chin that mark childhood’s end” (Jacobsen 2019).

Maya’s tale of the pride of having reinvented her culture is also the same tale Alethea Arnaquq-Baril has to tell (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). The woman behind the documentary *Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattooing* comes from Iqaluit, Nunavut. She says that for a long time she has been fascinated with Inuit tattoos after seeing a picture of an Inuk woman with tattoos on her face. Her first thoughts were whether this woman was a shaman, whether she was wise and powerful. She wanted to know more about what the tattoos had been used for, how the tattoos once looked, what her people had been through, and why the tattoos disappeared. At the end of the documentary she eventually has them placed on her own face and arms.

Both Maya and Alethea have been homesick and longing for their culture while outside their motherland. In her article, Maya says that for 10 years she

has travelled around as a Western tattoo artist, while Alethea has been away from her home country for 12 years to study. Alethea tells in the documentary that she herself thinks she has missed out on a lot (from her own culture). She states: “I’m 27 and I’ve never sewn my own parka. I’m clumsy at sharpening my ulo blade. I don’t know how to butcher and prepare seal meat. These are the most basic skills of a woman my age.” She follows up with: “I feel like there is a huge hole in my heart and I need to fill it with this knowledge” (Arnaquq-Baril 2011). She believes that every time she learns a new skill that an Inuk woman should be able to have, a small part of her is healing. According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, this is a reaction to a conflict between the Indigenous People and the modern western countries. He explains that the Indigenous Peoples have “... organisert seg gjennom transnasjonale organisasjoner og nettverk for å beskytte sine rettigheter til forfedres land og sine kulturelle tradisjoner” [organized themselves through transnational organizations and networks to protect their rights for the land of their ancestors and cultural traditions] (Hylland Eriksen 276).<sup>1</sup> Looking back on history, for both Greenland and Canada, both countries have experienced being converted from their own faith to Christianity. Both women who have an ethnic background with a common history of being converted from their “original” way of life to a western “modern” way of life feel that they have an urge to cultivate their “traditional” habits. Their encounter with the Western homogenized world has given them the desire to revitalize their own cultural heritage.

## Inuit tattoos on Facebook and Other Social Media

Inuit tattoos have started to become very visible on social media, especially on Facebook, where Maya Sialuk Jacobsen and Paninnguaq Lind Jensen have created a page to inform people about Inuit tattoos. Paninnguaq Lind Jensen is a young tattoo artist from Greenland who is undergoing training to become a traditional tattoo artist, bearing visible Inuit facial tattoos. The first thing you notice is a post they have placed at the top of the page that asks visitors of the site to respect “our patterns and traditions”. The site is primarily in English, however, when you look at the first entry on the Facebook page, it is in Danish, while some of the entries are in Greenlandic. In their “About” section, you can read about who both Maya and Paninnguaq are, and this information is written in English and Greenlandic only. It could be interpreted as having tried as much as possible to avoid writing in Danish, because of the colonization of Greenland by Denmark.

The site has many pictures that exhibit Inuit tattoos, and at first glance there are many pictures of women with Inuit tattoos. Historically, Inuit tattoos have been reserved primarily for women. In the documentary *Tunniit*, an older woman by the name of Annie Paingut Peterloosie and her husband comment that you were not a real woman if you did not have any Inuit tattoos. A woman would get

these tattoos once she learned the important skills that Alethea talked about earlier. The tattoos symbolized that she was ready to start a family. However, these days it is not just women who have had facial tattoos. The Facebook page also shows men who have been tattooed on the chin, but they are not the same as the women. A post can be read on their Facebook page, which explains exactly how men's tattoos worked in the past. A man's tattoo was a form of amulet to protect them or served as event markers if a taboo had been broken. An anonymous informant thought it was "a little strange" that some men choose to have tattoos on their chin, since they had heard that the chin tattoos were primarily for women.

Taboo is a big part of the Inuit religion, which they especially talk about in the documentary *Tunniit*. A French-Canadian ethnographer, Bernard Saladin D'Anglure, has interviewed one of the last tattooed women from Alethea's homeland. She explains that it was believed that women's menstruation blood would cause bad luck for the hunt, so the tattoos were used as a cleansing ritual when a young woman would have her first period. While researching further on the Facebook page, I found a DR (Danmark's Radio) article from April 23, 2018 (Sæhl et al. 2018), that is about Greenlanders, primarily in Nuuk, who had begun to get Inuit tattoos. A video had also been posted along with the article, where two young Greenlanders explain why they got their tattoos. The first was a young Greenlandic woman with a tattoo on her chin. She states the following in Danish: "Jeg har fået min tatovering for at tydeliggøre min grønlandsk identitet" [I got this tattoo to make clear that I have a Greenlandic identity] (Sæhl et al. 2018). A young Greenlandic man named Sebastian Enequist, who also has a tattoo on his chin, goes on to explain in Greenlandic: "Qallunaanngorsaanerput naammaleqaaq. Kakiornera aqutugalugu nunara utertikkusuppara" [I have had enough of living like a Dane. I will take my country back through my tattoos] (Sæhl et al. 2018). Maya Sialuk Jacobsen is also featured in the video where she says that the tattoos are a very significant way to take one's face back after a long period living under colonization.

I interviewed a young Greenlandic woman named Pani Enequist (Figure 1). I asked her about her reasoning for getting her Inuit tattoos. She says that, while growing up, she had not been told anything about how the Danes took the traditions from the Inuit Peoples and replaced them with Christian values. When she found out, her heart was broken. She had interviewed Maya (Sialuk Jacobsen) about Inuit tattoos, where Maya's stories had touched her greatly. Pani explains: "I decided to get my marking because I wanted to honour our old traditions and our people." Pani's explanation regarding her choice to have Inuit tattoos is related to Maya and Alethea's story of how one has the feeling of being deprived of one's indigenous Inuit traditions, which is very much related to one's identity. They have chosen to use the tattoos as an identity marker, which has "taken their faces back," as Maya Sialuk Jacobsen explained earlier.

## Other People's Opinions

But what do other people think about revitalizing an old tattoo tradition? An anonymous informant believed that it was about dignity and identity and that it was a personal decision people make about getting tattoos. The informant thought it was “a kind of courageous decision” that one makes when getting a face tattoo, since the face is the first thing you notice about a human being. Another opinion we heard was from an elderly Greenlandic lady living in Denmark. She thought the tattoos were ugly and that it is not a good way to show one's Greenlandic identity, as she herself thinks that there are other ways to show Greenlandic identity, such as having *tupilaq*<sup>2</sup> figures on display at home. However, a third informant, an elderly lady living in Nuuk, asserts that she is proud of the young people who choose to keep old traditions alive.

The questionnaire survey carried out as part of this research project (Appendix) shows that 46.51% of the participants believe that one must be associated with Greenlandic culture before one can have Inuit tattoos, whereas only 15.12% think that one must be born and raised in Greenland. 38.37% contend that everyone was allowed to have Inuit tattoos. Even though most people who answered the questionnaire believe that you must be associated with Greenlandic culture before one can have Inuit tattoos, it can be a cause for concern to know that as many as 38,37% believe that everyone is allowed to have Inuit tattoos. The reason I find this troubling is that cultural appreciation can easily become cultural appropriation. This is a very difficult subject, considering that so many Indigenous people receive these tattoos to heal from the trauma caused by colonization. This issue was also discussed in an informal conversation with Kamilla Østergaard Madsen, a psychology student, and Louisa Høyer, a certified tourist guide, who were both born and raised in Greenland. Louisa thought that the tattoos are great, and she has even considered getting one herself, as she has experienced that tourists do not believe that she is Greenlandic, as she does not look typically Greenlandic. However, she asserts that those who get these tattoos must be at least born and raised in Greenland, be integrated into the Greenlandic community, have a Greenlandic name and be able to speak Greenlandic. Kamilla believes that having a tattoo is a realization of cultural identity, especially since Greenland has experienced colonization. Kamilla says that Greenland is a rich culture that has been cornered, as Greenland is still part of the Rigsfællesskab (the Danish Realm). In order to create a contrast between the Danish and the Greenlandic, one has chosen to reinforce one's identity by getting Inuit tattoos. However, Kamilla thinks it is quite controversial, as she believes that you could end up having problems with being hired into larger companies with facial tattoos. Nuuk is a city with the largest foreign population compared to other cities in Greenland, and locals are often bilingual or speak only Danish. Thomas Hylland Eriksen comments that “Revitalisering er nesten altid en reaksjon på modernisering og

tiltagende kulturell homogenisering, og vil i en viss forstand gjenskabe den 'tradisjonelle' kulturen på den 'moderne' måte" [Revitalization is almost always a reaction to modernization and increasing cultural homogenization, and the revitalization will in some way revive the "traditional" culture in a modern way] (Hylland Eriksen 277). The reason could be that young people have chosen to take up the Inuit tattoo tradition with a modern relevant meaning, in order to distinguish between the Greenlandic and the Danish.

The various sources are consistent with each other, and they suggest that today's young people in Greenland have chosen to have these tattoos made in order to mark their Greenlandic identity. Inuit tattoos represented something else in the past (for example, a woman would get these tattoos once she learned the important skills a woman should have to start her own family), but these representations are still kept close as a memory of the past meaning of the tattoos. These memories are then chosen to be honoured, by getting the Inuit tattoos one's ancestors once had. However, the question of who is allowed to get these tattoos can be controversial, as some believe that one needs to be associated with the Greenlandic culture while others believe that it does not matter. These tattoos have clearly become a way of expressing the trauma that colonization has brought to Greenland and its people.

## Notes

Participants were allowed to have their full name used in this essay, and names that are freely promoted in social media and documentaries have also been used. Three out of five who participated in informal conversations were kept anonymous. The author herself has Inuit tattoos, which could have caused bias during the fieldwork as well as writing this article, however, the author has tried to stay as neutral as possible. It is, however, still possible to have bias when you have an interest in the subject, even if you do not have Inuit tattoos. The questionnaire was made through [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) and was the author's first time trying it out with a fellow student. It was distributed through two personal Facebook accounts, where the majority of the answers came from Greenlanders. The data received at the end of the trial (of the questionnaire) might have some flaws, but the data is still considered valid information. The questionnaire could have been more refined, such as giving the informant the possibility to supply more in-depth responses, but the author had a limited amount of time to do this research, considering the paper was originally an exam report in the first year of a Bachelor of Education program.

## NOTES

1. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

- In Greenland a *tupilaq* (plural *tupilliat*) is a physical representation through which supernatural misfortune was passed, carved from animal bones. Today *tupilliat* objects, figurines, or statues are among Greenland’s most popular carved souvenirs and were historically given as souvenirs to ethnographers or whalers (Nuttall 2004, 2075).

APPENDIX

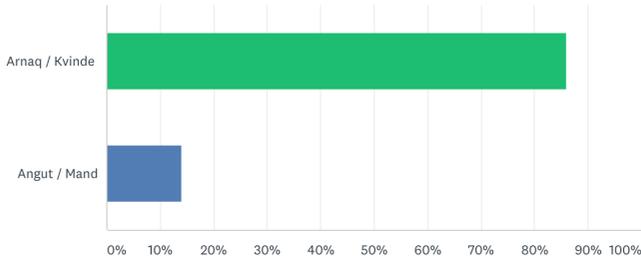
Questionnaire answered (Available from 10 May 2019 - 20 June 2019). Made at Survey Monkey, Website: <https://da.surveymonkey.com>

Sp.1

Tilpas Gem som

Suiaassusseq / Køn

Answered: 85 Skipped: 2



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER	
Arnaq / Kvinde	85,88%	73
Angut / Mand	14,12%	12
I ALT		85

Gender:

Women 85.88%

Men 14.12%

Total 85

Sp.2

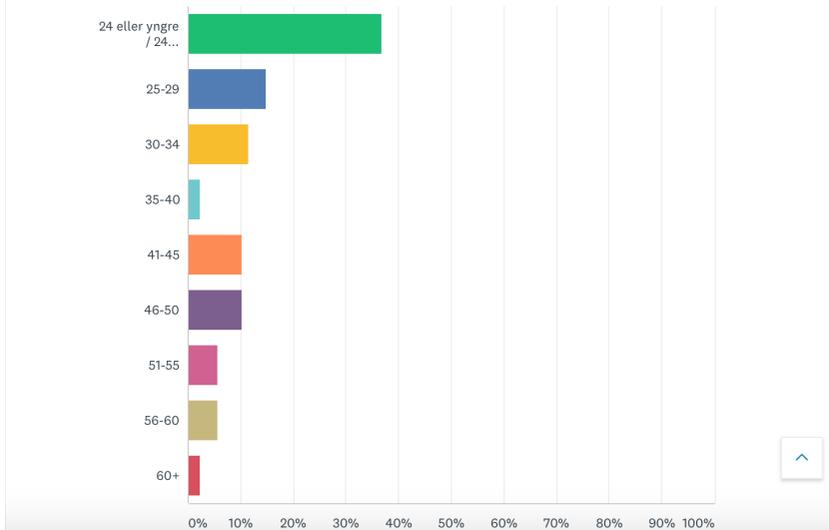


Tilpas

Gem som ▼

## Ukiut / Alder

Answered: 87 Skipped: 0



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER	
▼ 24 eller yngre / 24 inuusunnerillu	36,78%	32
▼ 25-29	14,94%	13
▼ 30-34	11,49%	10
▼ 35-40	2,30%	2
▼ 41-45	10,34%	9
▼ 46-50	10,34%	9
▼ 51-55	5,75%	5
▼ 56-60	5,75%	5
▼ 60+	2,30%	2
<b>I ALT</b>		<b>87</b>

Age

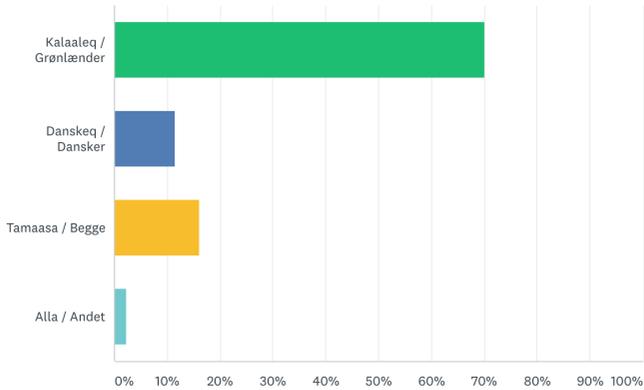
24 or younger (the rest is just the other ages)

Sp.3


Tilpas
Gem som ▼

## Inuiaassuseq / Nationalitet

Answered: 87 Skipped: 0



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER
▼ Kalaaleq / Grønlander	70,11% 61
▼ Danskeq / Dansker	11,49% 10
▼ Tamaasa / Begge	16,09% 14
▼ Alla / Andet	2,30% 2
<b>I ALT</b>	<b>87</b>

### Nationality

Greenlander 70.11%

Dane 11.49%

Both 16.09%

Other 2.30%

Sp.4

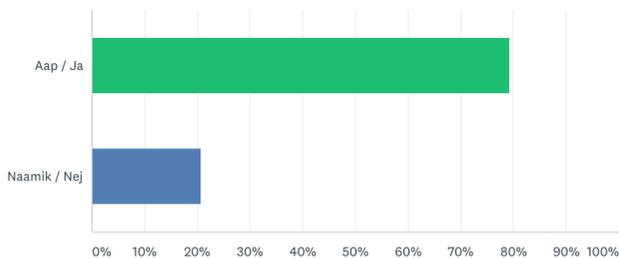


Tilpas

Gem som ▼

## Inuit tattoos ilisimasaqarfigivigit? / Kender du til inuit tatoveringer?

Answered: 87 Skipped: 0



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER	
▼ Aap / Ja	79,31%	69
▼ Naamik / Nej	20,69%	18
I ALT		87

Do you have knowledge about Inuit tattoos?

Yes 79.31%

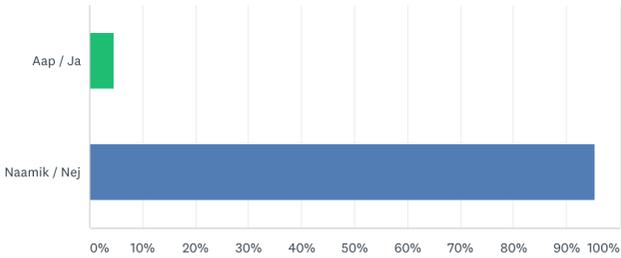
No 20.69%

Sp.5

Tilpas Gem som

### Nammineq inuit tattoo-nik kakiorneqarpit? / Har du inuit tatoveringer?

Answered: 87 Skipped: 0



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER
Aap / Ja	4,60% 4
Naamik / Nej	95,40% 83
<b>I ALT</b>	<b>87</b>

Do you have Inuit tattoos?

Yes 4.60%

No 95.40%

Sp.6

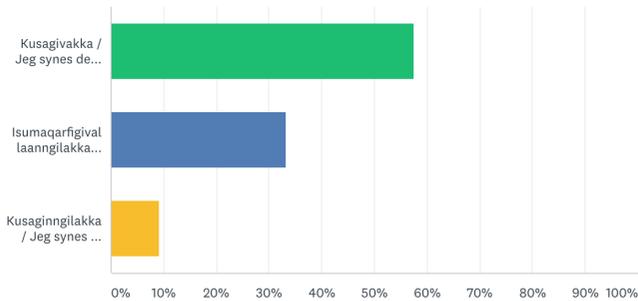


Tilpas

Gem som ▼

Inuit tattoo assakkut qanoq isumaqarfigaagit? / Hvordan har du det med inuit tatoveringer på hænderne?

Answered: 87 Skipped: 0



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER
▼ Kusagivakka / Jeg synes de er flotte	57,47% 50
▼ Isumaqarfigival laanngilakka / Jeg har ikke rigtig nogen mening om det	33,33% 29
▼ Kusaginngilakka / Jeg synes de er grimme	9,20% 8
<b>I ALT</b>	<b>87</b>

What do you feel about Inuit tattoos on the hands?

I think they are beautiful 57.47%

Neutral 33.33%

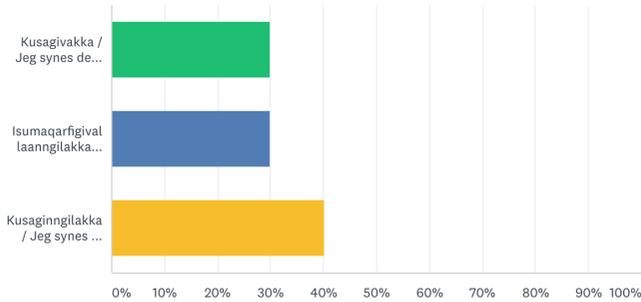
I think they are ugly 9.20%

Sp.7


Tilpas
Gem som ▼

Inuit tattoo kiinnakkut qanoq isumaqarfigaagit? / Hvordan har du det med inuittatoveringer på ansigtet?

Answered: 87 Skipped: 0



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER
▼ Kusagivakka / Jeg synes de er flotte	29,89% 26
▼ Isumaqarfigivallaangilakka / Jeg har ikke rigtig nogen mening om det	29,89% 26
▼ Kusaginngilakka / Jeg synes de er grimme	40,23% 35
<b>I ALT</b>	<b>87</b>

What do you feel about Inuit tattoos on the face?

I think they are beautiful 29.89%

Neutral 29.89%

I think they are ugly 40.23%

Sp.8

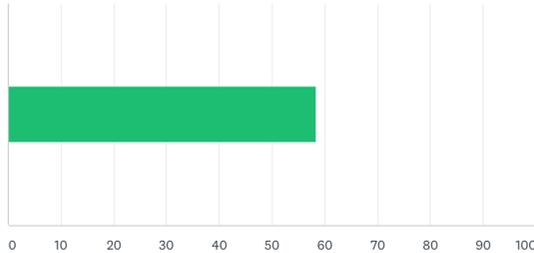


Tilpas

Gem som ▼

Una oqaaseqatigiliaq isumaqatigiviuk? / Er du enig med denne sætning: Inuit tattoo uterøner, kinaassutsimut ileqqutoqqanullu iluaqtaasutut ajunngitsutullu isigaara / Jeg synes at inuit tatoveringer er en god måde at tilbagebringe gamle traditioner

Answered: 86 Skipped: 1



SVARVALG	GENNEMSNITLIGT ANTAL	SAMLET ANTAL	BESVARELSER
Besvarelser	58	5,025	86
Respondenter i alt: 86			

Do you agree with this statement?

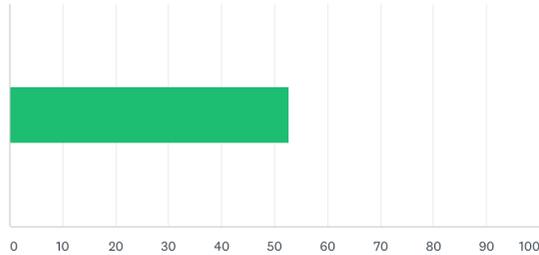
“I think Inuit tattoos are a good way to revive old traditions.”

Sp.9

Tilpas Gem som

Una oqaaseqatigiiliaq isumaqatigiviuk? / Er du enig med denne sætning: Inuit tattoo kalaaliussutsimut takutinnissaanut pitsaasorjuuvoq / Jeg synes inuit tatoveringer er en god måde vise sin grønlandske identitet på

Answered: 86 Skipped: 1



SVARVALG	GENNEMSNITLIGT ANTAL	SAMLET ANTAL	BESVARELSER
Besvarelser	53	4,540	86
Respondenter i alt: 86			

Do you agree with this statement?

“I think Inuit tattoos are a good way to show ones Greenlandic identity.”

Sp.10

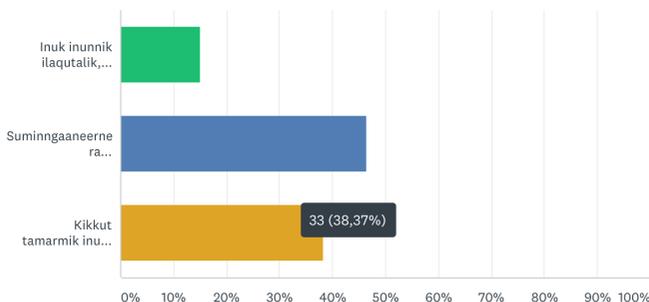


Tilpas

Gem som ▼

## Kikkut inuit tattoo-nik kakiorneqaqqusaappat? / Hvem må gerne have inuit tatoveringer?

Answered: 86 Skipped: 1



SVARVALG	BESVARELSER
▼ Inuk inunnik ilaqtalik, inuttullu imminut isigisoq. / En person som er fra inuit afkom og anser sig selv som inuk.	15,12% 13
▼ Suminggaaneerera isumaqanngilaq, imminut inuttut isigiguni naammaqaaq. / Deres afstamning er ligegyldig, så længe de ser sig selv som en del af inuit kulturen.	46,51% 40
▼ Kikkut tamarmik inuit tattoo-nik pequsaapput . / Det er lige meget, alle kan få inuit tatoveringer.	38,37% 33
<b>I ALT</b>	<b>86</b>

### Who is allowed to have Inuit tattoos?

A person of Inuit descent, who considers themselves Inuk 15.12%

Their ancestry does not matter, as long as they consider themselves as a part of the Inuit culture 46.51%

It does not matter; anyone can get Inuit tattoos 38.37%

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