

## **Island geographies of separation and cohesion: The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and the geopolitics of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)**

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**Abstract:** Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) is an Arctic highly autonomous subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ) of Denmark, its former coloniser. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020 has influenced both Kalaallit Nunaat's relations with the outside world and relations between people and places within the territory. The Kalaallit Nunaat government's response to the pandemic, including both internal and external travel bans and restrictions on movement, has focused on eradicating the disease from the territory. This strategy, however, is challenged both by the SNIJ's economic reliance on Denmark and by the Danish government's own

strategy of mitigating the disease. This paper explores the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has altered how the people of Kalaallit Nunaat interact with the people of Denmark and with one another, ultimately shedding light on the relationship between islands, disease, and geopolitics more generally.

*Keywords:* Arctic, coronavirus (COVID-19), disease, geopolitics, islands, Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)

# **Island geographies of separation and cohesion: The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and the geopolitics of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)**

## **Introduction**

This paper considers the ways in which the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic of 2020 is influencing the geopolitics of Kalaallit Nunaat (in English, 'Greenland'), a highly autonomous subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ) of Denmark. We focus on how the pandemic has influenced both Kalaallit Nunaat's relationship with the outside world and relations between people and places within the territory. This sheds light on the geopolitical impacts of disease in island communities more generally.

The first case of Covid-19 in Kalaallit Nunaat was confirmed on 16 March 2020. At the time of writing (20 April 2020), Kalaallit Nunaat is the world's only country or autonomous territory to have transitioned from confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus to no active cases. This paper is a piece of research in real-time, written on 3-13 April 2020 (with minor revisions undertaken over the subsequent week and a half), as events are still unfolding and policies are still developing in both Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark. Our research is thus a snapshot in time, sacrificing the benefit of hindsight for the ability to describe and analyse transformative events while immersed in their provisionality.

Next, we discuss perceived links between islands, geopolitics, and infectious disease and then describe our methods. We then provide an overview of Kalaallit Nunaat's development from a colonised archipelago to an autonomous SNIJ, before describing the development of Kalaallit Nunaat's discursive and policy approach to the Covid-19 pandemic. We consider the geopolitical impacts of the pandemic before offering a short conclusion.

## **Islands, geopolitics, and infectious disease**

Agnew (2003: 5) defines ‘geopolitics’ as “an examination of the geographical assumptions, designations and understandings that enter into the making of world politics.” Islands are often regarded as geopolitical hotspots (Mountz 2015; Ratter 2018). Border islands sometimes serve as containers for low-level contestation between states that wish to score political points with foreign or domestic publics but that also wish to avoid the conflict escalating across wider spatial scales (Baldacchino 2017). Superpowers may seek to draw even remote islands into their spheres of influence, thereby denying their geostrategic resources to competitors (Davis, Munger and Legacy 2020). Yet a sense of island isolation can be significant for islanders’ own construction of nationhood and identity (Bustos and Román 2019; Veenendaal 2020), with the ‘legibility’ of island geographies proving conducive to conceptualising territorially bounded political units (Grydehøj, Nadarajah and Markussen 2020). All this plays a role in the manner in which islands and archipelagos have been envisioned, claimed, exploited, and reclaimed within coloniality (Gómez-Barris and Joseph 2019).

Although the ‘geopolitics of disease’ (Ingram 2009) are not exclusive to islands, the fact that island geography is linked with particular patterns of centre-periphery power relations (including colonial relations) suggests that an island perspective on this topic may be worthwhile. The association of islands with territorial boundedness and isolation has contributed to their use as convenient laboratories for studying disease (e.g. Cliff and Haggett 1980; Mantle and Pepys 1974). However, the effect of islandness on prevalence of disease is complex. Common methods of managing epidemics include: quarantining suspected or confirmed cases and close contacts, implementing information campaigns to provide the public with resources and advice on prevention and protection, and restricting and controlling travel (Yang et al. 2020; McCloskey and Heymann 2020; Wu and McGoogan 2020). Islands may be

regarded as possessing geographical advantages in the execution of these methods due to their perceived isolation and their accompanying ability to control mobility and draw upon strong social capital (Baldacchino 2005).

Nevertheless, the history of epidemics and pandemics suggests that, as is true more generally, even apparently ‘isolated’ islands exist on a continuum of different degrees of isolation and connectedness (Baldacchino 2008; Lewis 2009; Grydehøj and Casagrande 2020). Bridges, tunnels, causeways, airports, and high-speed ferries are increasingly connecting islands physically (Karampela, Kizos and Spilanis 2014; Leung et al. 2017), with the result that many islands have better transport links to other locations than do many non-island places. Increasing transportation options, frequencies, and speeds means increasing flows of people with the potential for introducing pathogens (Cui, Takeuchi and Saito 2006). As transport networks intensify and expand, “pathogens and their vectors can now move further, faster and in greater numbers than ever before” (Tatem, Rogers and Hay 2006). In the case of Covid-19, the swiftness, reach, accessibility, and closeness of passengers for extended time periods of modern transport networks place people at particularly high risk (Asadi et al. 2020; Wang and Du 2020; Tian 2020). It is thus noteworthy that pandemic influenza A(H1N1) reached Iceland approximately one month after it first appeared in the world in April 2009 (Sigmundsdottir et al. 2010), and Iceland recorded its first confirmed case of Covid-19 on 28 February 2020 (Elkjær 2020, March 24). By contrast, the main Black Death outbreak in 14<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe never reached Iceland, though the island was devastated by plague-like epidemics in 1402-1404 and 1494-1495 (Streeter et al. 2012).

The novel coronavirus causing Covid-19 was first identified in China at the end of 2019 and led to the 2020 pandemic. On 13 January 2020, Thailand reported the first case outside of China, followed by the archipelagic country of Japan on 16 January. The disease has since spread to nearly all countries and territories around the world. China has mainly approached

the disease using traditional tactics such as isolation, quarantine, physical distancing of people, community containment, and travel restrictions. These methods were introduced to China by Dr Wu Liande, regarded as the founder of China's public health system, to suppress the 1910 pneumonic plague outbreak in Northeastern China (Ma and Li 2016). For Covid-19, the Chinese government initiated a strict lockdown of Wuhan, the city at the epicentre of the outbreak, on 23 January 2020, suspending all internal and external transport for over two months. A few days later, Hubei Province as a whole was locked down, and virtually all transportation was restricted and monitored at a national level. These restrictions have proven effective at mitigating the spread of Covid-19 in China (Chinazzi et al. 2020; MacIntyre 2020) with the main danger currently being reintroduction of the virus from other countries.

As Covid-19 spread worldwide, many countries sought to balance epidemiological impact (namely in mortality) and economic losses. The Kalaallit Nunaat government's approach to managing this highly contagious disease has been quite similar to China's, notwithstanding the tremendous differences between Kalaallit Nunaat and China in terms of geography, population size, culture, and political system. It is thus worth asking whether island status really does have any particular effect on the presence and prevalence of infectious disease. While it could be argued that island isolation slows the arrival of coronavirus, it would be premature to conclude that islands are generally safer from infection than non-islands. What is more interesting for this paper is how island geopolitics affect and are affected by infectious disease.

## **Methods**

The fact that we have undertaken this research and written this paper in the midst of events presents a number of challenges. One challenge is that our literature search found no existing

published scholarly research on the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on Kalaallit Nunaat, a circumstance that highlights the novelty of the study but that also means we are building this research from scratch. The only material available at the time of writing concerned impacts across countries including Greenland (e.g. Crawford et al. 2020) and non-peer reviewed preprints (e.g. Chipperfield et al. 2020). Another challenge is that, with the situation on the ground rapidly developing over the course of our research, we are unable to obtain a perspective of distance or to do more than surmise at the pandemic's long-term impacts in Kalaallit Nunaat. As such, this manuscript presents a snapshot of the situation in early April 2020.

We must use the means of data collection available within the context of most countries being locked down by travel bans. We thus rely here on a qualitative analysis of a combination of 1) unsystematically sampled newspaper articles; 2) a complete sample of articles present in the 'Coronavirus' theme section of the online version of *Sermitsiaq* (the largest Kalaallit Nunaat newspaper and a bilingual Danish/Kalaallisut language publication) between 27 January 2020 and 7 April 2020 (n=363); 3) social media posts on the online version of *Sermitsiaq* and in individual and group Facebook pages; and 4) personal written correspondence with seven Kalaallit Nunaat contacts of this paper's first author from 1-6 April 2020. This correspondence was provided following the acquisition of informed written consent, and all quoted correspondents declined an offer of anonymity.

The sample of individuals who engaged in written correspondence was not representative. The sample included 5 residents of Nuuk and 2 individuals living in Copenhagen who, together, were 6 individuals of Inuit ethnicity and 1 ethnic Dane. All seven respondents have university education. Ages varied from 28 to 56, and there were 3 women and 4 men.

Because none of the authors speak or read the Kalaallisut language, we relied on information available in Danish or English, Kalaallit Nunaat's second and third languages respectively. Among ethnic Inuit, knowledge of Danish is associated with higher educational and socioeconomic status, while knowledge of Kalaallisut among ethnic Danes is rare, leading to differential opportunities for different social groups (Gad 2019). This results in a situation in which much official information, media output, and other material is produced in Danish, then translated into Kalaallisut (Villadsen 2016).

Finally, it is especially important to be aware of one's positionality—one's place within the system of coloniality—when researching colonised societies (Grydehøj 2018). The authors are a multinational group of scholars. The first author, who grew up in the USA and now lives in Copenhagen, studies the intersection of culture, politics, and economy in island communities and has undertaken ethnographic research in Nuuk. The second author grew up in Canada but lives in the UK after moving there from Norway and is a disaster and health researcher focusing on islands and the polar regions. The third author grew up in China and lives in Guangzhou: her research focus is the construction of community among ethnic minorities. The first and second authors collaborate on research concerning conceptions of island sustainability, and the first and third authors collaborate on research concerning islands and coloniality. Both these research collaborations have involved work concerning Kalaallit Nunaat's relationship with Denmark.

### **Kalaallit Nunaat: Colonial geographies of separation and cohesion**

Kalaallit Nunaat is often called the world's largest island (2,166,086 km<sup>2</sup>), but it is in fact an archipelago consisting of a large island ringed by numerous smaller islands. This Arctic territory's 56,000 residents are spread throughout 74 coastal towns and settlements. There are



no road connections between towns and settlements, which are instead linked by air (airplane, helicopter), maritime (ferry, small boat with outboard motor), and snow-borne (dogsled, snowmobile) transport, some of which is seasonal and all of which is weather dependent. Scheduled international airplane flights connect various Kalaallit Nunaat towns with Reykjavík, Iceland, but the main overseas passenger transport lifeline is between Copenhagen and Kalaallit Nunaat's airport hub of Kangerlussuaq (population: 500), from which flights run to smaller airports elsewhere in the territory, many of which in turn connect by helicopter to other towns and settlements. Around 18,000 people live in Nuuk, Kalaallit Nunaat's capital, largest town, and centre of business and government.

Kalaallit Nunaat was settled by the ancestors of today's Inuit, who arrived in the northwest of the island from present-day Nunavut around 800 years ago. Prior to the colonial period, the Inuit pursued a seminomadic subsistence hunting lifestyle. Danish colonialism began in 1721 with a religious mission led by the Lutheran pastor Hans Egede. This mission set the precedent for establishing permanent settlements in the form of 'colonial towns', beginning a long process of colonially driven cultural change (Beukal, Jensen and Rytter 2010; Rud 2017; Sonne 2017).

Among the most immediately devastating impacts of this early colonial intervention was the introduction of disease. In 1733-1734, smallpox brought over from Copenhagen killed an estimated 1000-3000 Inuit, with the disease spreading rapidly as survivors fled from its epicentre in the areas surrounding Nuuk (Klem 1966; Bech 1999, June 30; Gulløv 2017). Recurrent smallpox epidemics in later years were similarly catastrophic, with an outbreak in the early 1780s nearly halving the population of Nuuk and with an 1801 outbreak apparently reducing the populations of Aasiaat by 42% and of Sisimiut by 89% (Gad 1976). The earliest census of Kalaallit Nunaat, undertaken in 1789 and including some estimates, gave a total population of 5122, indicating that the epidemics of the early colonial period killed large

proportions of the archipelago's Inuit population. The history of deadly diseases coming to Kalaallit Nunaat from Denmark is thus at least as old as the history of colonialism in Kalaallit Nunaat.

Kalaallit Nunaat formally ceased to be a colony in 1953, when it was integrated into the Danish state as a county. A Home Rule system, granting Kalaallit Nunaat considerable autonomy, was introduced in 1979, in part due to Denmark's increasing European integration, with Kalaallit Nunaat ultimately leaving the European Economic Community (predecessor to the European Union) in 1985. Kalaallit Nunaat today possesses complex relations with the European Union, of which it is classed as an overseas territory (Gad 2016). In 2009, Kalaallit Nunaat came under an even more empowering system of Self-Government, which significantly provided the SNIJ with the right to become politically independent at the time of its own choosing. Opinion polls within Kalaallit Nunaat have consistently shown a substantial majority of respondents desiring eventual independence from Denmark (Grydehøj 2019). Kalaallit Nunaat, however, remains strongly economically and institutionally dependent upon Denmark (Grydehøj 2020).

Kalaallit Nunaat's colonial history and its aftermath have inevitably influenced the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on this territory's geopolitics.

### **The response to Covid-19 in Kalaallit Nunaat**

Public consciousness in Kalaallit Nunaat concerning the novel coronavirus emerged gradually and largely in reaction to developments in Denmark, highlighting the way in which many of Kalaallit Nunaat's relations (both material and intangible) with the outside world are mediated through Denmark. Early focus was also placed on developments in the Faroe Islands (Denmark's other highly autonomous SNIJ), which recorded relatively early confirmed cases

of the virus in the first week of March 2020 and implemented an early strategy of widespread testing.

Early concerns within Kalaallit Nunaat involved local fishery actors' reliance on Chinese labour (for example, the 60 Chinese workers employed by Polar Seafood; Schultz-Nielsen 2020, February 3), and reports spread through social media on 22 February concerning medical personnel in hazmat suits at the airport in Nuuk (Sermitsiaq.AG 2020, February 22). As late as 3 March, Kalaallit Nunaat's Epidemics Commission, which was coordinating with authorities in Denmark, was not recommending that the public take any exceptional measures (Kristiansen 2020, March 3). By 6 March, the Epidemics Commission was recommending exceptional measures that closely followed Danish policy, such as advising against gatherings of over 1000 people (Kristiansen 2020, March 6)—an enormous number by Kalaallit Nunaat standards, as it exceeds the populations of most settlements. During this period, Kalaallit Nunaat media reports concerning the novel coronavirus continued to be frequently accompanied by photographs of China and/or Chinese people.

As awareness of the situation in other countries and territories rose, debate began among the Kalaallit Nunaat public regarding the appropriate response. On 9 March, it was feared that a plane from Copenhagen had landed in Kangerlussuaq carrying three infected individuals who had recently been in the Faroes; quarantine and self-isolation procedures were briefly introduced for some travellers, but the subsequent Covid-19 tests came out negative (Sermitsiaq.AG 2020, March 10). Some members of the public began arguing for the cancellation of all flights into the territory in order to prevent the virus from entering. At this point, scheduled flights were still running from Copenhagen and Reykjavik. Pele Broberg (2020, March 11), a politician from Partii Naleraq, used an open letter to the Epidemics Commission to propose a number of measures, including use of Kangerlussuaq as a checkpoint and quarantine site for people travelling into Kalaallit Nunaat.

On the evening of 11 March, Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced that the country would be entering a state of lockdown from 13 March, with the shutting of schools, childcare, and many private businesses and public institutions. Denmark's borders were closed to most international travellers from 14 March. On 12 March, the Kalaallit Nunaat government began recommending against all but essential travel as well as requesting that the public avoid hoarding and panic buying (Lindstrøm 2020, March 12).

The first case of Covid-19 in Kalaallit Nunaat, a resident of Nuuk, was confirmed on 16 March. The next day, the government announced that all ordinary flights into, out of, and within Kalaallit Nunaat would be cancelled from 21 March and that people should furthermore avoid travelling between towns and settlements by boat, dogsled, or snowmobile (Lindstrøm 2020, March 17). Kindergartens and primary schools were also shut across Kalaallit Nunaat, with exceptions for students whose parents were unable to care for them, for example because they were performing vital work functions (Schultz-Nielsen 2020, March 17). The government strategy was not simply to mitigate the impacts of the virus (as was being pursued in Denmark by this point) but to prevent it from ever gaining a foothold in the territory to begin with, leading to a focus on restriction of movement, contact tracing, and the locking down of Nuuk in particular (Jørgensen 2020, March 24).

On 6 April, to the shock of many in Kalaallit Nunaat, the Danish government announced a planned gradual reopening of Denmark from 15 April, beginning with kindergartens and primary schools, as a means of restarting the Danish economy. This was in some senses incompatible with the Kalaallit Nunaat strategy of eliminating the coronavirus from the SNIJ entirely. On 7 April, the Kalaallit Nunaat government announced that kindergartens and schools outside of Nuuk would begin reopening on 14 April but also that both internal and external travel restrictions would be extended until 1 May.

At the time of writing (22 April): 1150 individuals have been tested for Covid-19 in various parts of Kalaallit Nunaat. 11 infections have been confirmed (all in Nuuk), and all 11 infected individuals have recovered.

### **Effects on Kalaallit Nunaat's relations with the world**

Over the past decades, Kalaallit Nunaat has become progressively more integrated into global economic, cultural, and political systems. These processes have challenged the idea that Kalaallit Nunaat is essentially isolated. In the words of Ulunnguaq Markussen (2020, April 6; personal correspondence), a 28-year-old student originally from Uummannaq and now living in Nuuk, "Greenland always used to be far away from all the crises and now seems close to the rest of the world. I think it's the first time we truly feel that we are part of the world." Covid-19 has highlighted both the fragility and the dangers of Kalaallit Nunaat's global connections, but it has also highlighted the strengths and opportunities connected to the territory's remote archipelagic geography.

On the one hand, the disruptions to Kalaallit Nunaat's everyday connections with Denmark have set in relief the renewal and reinvention of these links, from the establishment of new air links to Copenhagen via Reykjavik for the transportation of test samples, to the sharing of resources and expertise. For all the discussion of Kalaallit Nunaat's potential to choose its own alliances with countries to both the East and the West (Grydehøj 2016), Covid-19 has brought Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark 'emotionally' closer together, even as it has kept Inuit and Danes physically apart. This matches the global shift from the initial instruction of 'social distancing' to 'physical distancing' for reducing coronavirus transmission, on the important premise that people need to remain as social as possible without physical proximity. This situation also resembles the aftermath of the tsunami that devastated parts of Kalaallit

Nunaat on 18 June 2017, which resulted in an outpouring of both governmental and private support from Denmark (Nordvang Jensen 2017, June 20). Aká Bendtsen (2020, April 6; personal correspondence), a 40-year-old working in tourism management, originally from Qaqortoq and now living in Nuuk, feels that the situation has had a positive effect on the relationship between Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark, stating that she “didn’t realize how connected we are with Denmark, and how we help each other.”

On the other hand, the situation has also highlighted Kalaallit Nunaat’s capacity to stand by itself, effectively designing and implementing policy in tense and rapidly developing situations. Kalaallit Nunaat’s ability to survive and even thrive without its coloniser during Germany’s World War II occupation of Denmark plays an important role in Kalaallit Nunaat national consciousness. Depending on how the situation develops, the Covid-19 pandemic may come to play a similar role in Kalaallit Nunaat culture, helping to clarify and rebalance what, precisely, Kalaallit Nunaat is capable of doing for itself, what must come from Denmark, and what can come from elsewhere in the world. As many of Kalaallit Nunaat’s key industries (e.g. fishing, tourism, transport, mining, and hospitality) face severe impediments or even total cessation of activities, the government is stepping in to support both companies and individual employees with direct financial compensation (Munk Veirum 2020, March 26). Notwithstanding the reigning discourse of Kalaallit Nunaat’s economic dependence on Denmark and its fundamental inability to act independently (Grydehøj 2020), the SNIJ is acting very much like a great many sovereign states. Kalaallit Nunaat has perhaps never seemed so independent as it does today. These feelings of greater self-reliance may deepen further if Denmark’s 6 April shift toward an opening up policy comes to be seen not just as incompatible with, but also as blatantly opposed to, a Kalaallit Nunaat policy of virus eradication.

### **Effects on Kalaallit Nunaat’s internal relations**

Kalaallit Nunaat is in some respects a product of colonial cartography, an Inuit territory boxed in with Denmark and separated from its immediate neighbours in Nunavut to the West. It is only in the past century that Kalaallit Nunaat has been imagined as a collection of towns and settlements joined together into a national consciousness by a particularly ‘legible’ island geography (Grydehøj, Nadarajah and Markussen 2020).

Yet Kalaallit Nunaat is not simply an island territory; it is specifically an archipelago, with vast distances between towns and settlements that are not connected by road or rail. On 17 March, Kalaallit Nunaat’s Prime Minister Kim Kielsen explained the ban on internal flights within the territory by saying: “Our country is unique in the sense that we are 74 isolated places, which can each be shut down independently. This allows us to keep the disease out of some towns and settlements” (Lindstrøm 2020, March 17; translation by first author).

The cultural, economic, and political gap between Nuuk and Kalaallit Nunaat’s other towns and settlements has long been a matter of concern, with many feeling that Nuuk is an essentially ‘Danish’ town that has undue influence on the remainder of the territory (Grydehøj 2014). Conflicts between power centres and peripheries within archipelagos are not unique to Kalaallit Nunaat but are a common phenomenon (Favole and Giordana 2018). At present, Nuuk—which as of 26 April is the site of all the SNIJ’s confirmed Covid-19 cases—finds itself in an unusual position, subjected to a comprehensive lockdown while daily life in many other parts of Kalaallit Nunaat continues for many people along somewhat normal lines. Lars Villadsen (2020, April 5; personal correspondence, translation by first author), a 56-year-old man, originally from the small town of Qasigiannuguit and now living in Nuuk, writes that:

In the rest of Kalaallit Nunaat, restrictions are not nearly as strict as in Nuuk. [...] If we’re talking about use of public transport, Air Greenland, Royal Arctic Line (with

its own passenger ship), and the little regional shipping line Disko Line, then transport has been halted for the time being—bearing in mind that there are not too many passengers anyway at this time of year, the crisis is not so extreme relative to what's normal. There are in any case few ordinary Kalaallit who use these relatively expensive transport methods, especially Air Greenland's and Royal Arctic Line's prices, where people have always been more or less tied to their locality. People instead [have tended to] use small boats with outboard motors to get to the nearest settlement or town [...]. There haven't been big changes in product supply to and from towns, settlements, and regions.

Two correspondents express that the situation has created a sense of distance and changing power relations between Nuuk and the rest of Kalaallit Nunaat, describing feelings of 'loneliness' and 'powerlessness' as well as concern about an inability to visit friends and family, both elsewhere in the SNIJ and overseas. The travel restrictions between towns and settlements have caused a variety of problems, for example with the small settlements in the vicinity of Nuuk being totally cut off from their only nearby town, and with some children living in settlements being cut off from their school when it reopened in mid-April because the school is located in a different municipality than their home settlement (Kristiansen 2020, April 8).

Among the special measures in Nuuk has been a total ban on alcohol sales, introduced with no warning and immediate effect for the purpose of protecting children and families living under lockdown (Schultz-Nielsen 2020, March 28). Several correspondents identify unanticipated results of this ban on alcohol sales, ranging from mockery by individuals in other towns and settlements (where no such restrictions are in place) to shifts in relative social status, with people seeking to avoid social contact with ethnic Danes (who are regarded as more likely



to be infected because they are most likely to have travelled overseas) rather than ethnic Inuit of lower socioeconomic status.

Multiple correspondents also note the importance of digital media in general and social media in particular for connecting people across Kalaallit Nunaat and elsewhere in the Arctic, as indeed was the case long before the pandemic began (Lanteigne 2020, April 5). The long-running Facebook group ‘politikkikkut oqalliffik - Politisk diskussionsrum’ (*Political Discussion Room*), which is predominantly in the Kalaallisut language and has at present 12,338 members, is now dominated by posts concerning Covid-19. On 16 March, the largely Kalaallisut Facebook group ‘COVID19-mut illersorumallutik angerlarsimaannartut ikorfartoqatigiiffiat’ (*Support Group for Those Who Stay Home to Protect Themselves against Covid-19*), which currently has 6969 members, was established with the purpose of facilitating mutual assistance among people coping with the challenges of Covid-19.

Language has long been a point of social division in Kalaallit Nunaat, due to Kalaallisut’s status as the most widely spoken language and Danish’s status as an elite language. The SNIJ’s official language is the western dialect of Kalaallisut. There were complaints in the early days of the novel coronavirus’ spread in the SNIJ that important information on the disease was being presented in Danish alone in press conferences and on official websites, thereby cutting off many members of society from timely and accurate information (Schultz-Nielsen and Kristiansen 2020, March 5; Lindstrøm 2020, March 11).

## **Discussion**

Infectious disease cannot be separated from geopolitics, due to its inseparability from relations of space, power, and resources (Garrett 1994; Ingram 2009). Hierarchies of space and power are startlingly evident in a 2018 Danish university encyclopaedia entry on Hans Egede, which

turns the leader of the early 18<sup>th</sup>-Century colonial mission to the true victim of the colonial process:

When the smallpox epidemic spread in 1733-34, Egede truly witnessed his life's work crumble. Hundreds of the newly christianised [Inuit] Greenlanders died. Misfortunes continued to rain down upon him. In 1735, his wife Gertrud died after a period of illness and exhaustion from the immense work involved in keeping the colony running while her husband was travelling. Her death was a great blow to Hans Egede, who chose to send her body to Denmark a year later. The destructiveness of the epidemic and his wife's death pushed him into depression (Mølholm Olesen 2018; translation by first author).

In narratives and discourses of infectious disease, it is often the case that some lives are of greater value than others, that some places are more important than others (Laurie 2015; Scott, Crawford-Browne and Sanders 2016).

However globalised the world, however integrated its economies, and however mobile its people, approaches to disease are still largely determined nationally, regionally, and locally. The government of Kalaallit Nunaat may have found in the territory's archipelagic geography and small population a compelling argument for seeking to eradicate—not merely mitigate—the novel coronavirus. Such an argument proved impractical or insufficiently compelling for the government of Denmark. Koch (2020) explained, “you don't want the virus to enter the country and you are in a position in Greenland where you can actually shut down the country, towns and settlements. You can't do that efficiently in Denmark.” Policies that work in one society and one space may not work in another, though the similarity of Kalaallit Nunaat's strategy to that of China should caution against attempts to suggest any kind of geographical

determinism. Yet the decisions made in different societies and spaces are mutually contingent: pursuing mitigation in Denmark may in the long term necessitate pursuing mitigation in Kalaallit Nunaat. The same is true for more populous countries and territories that have pursued eradication strategies yet must adapt to a quite different policy approach internationally.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had complex effects on both Kalaallit Nunaat's relationship with the world as a whole and its relationship with itself. Looking back at the SNIJ's colonial history, Lars Villadsen (2020, April 5; personal correspondence, translation by first author) asserts:

Kalaallit Nunaat was to a certain extent brought together by the introduction of Home Rule and Self-Government but has since then always lacked someone or something around which to unite. Someone—because we don't regard, for example, the Prime Minister (neither the current or the past) and/or the Parliament as a gathering point for the population. [...] As a result, there are a lot of loyal adherents to Kalaallit Nunaat [as a territorial unit], simply because we have [nothing else] around which to unify the nation. None of the political parties have sought to exploit the crisis to their own ends—so they say. [...] I feel that Kalaallit Nunaat has never been more (structurally) dependent on Denmark. [...] But a lot of people wish that Kalaallit Nunaat could itself undertake testing of corona samples in Nuuk instead of in Copenhagen, as the chief medical officer [Henrik L. Hansen] puts it, we are waiting to receive equipment— from the USA(!)

The imperial process by which the scattered peoples of today's Kalaallit Nunaat were gathered together into a colony, then a county, then a partly autonomous territory, and now a highly autonomous territory has encouraged territorial understandings of nationhood, understandings

that are now under strain as Kalaallit Nunaat is pulled toward Denmark and pulled apart from itself. Simultaneously, three correspondents express the feeling that the coronavirus pandemic is serving to unite the nation into a collective to fight a common enemy in the form of Covid-19.

It might be speculated whether Kalaallit Nunaat's particular combination of islandness and colonial history has encouraged its decision to simultaneously distance itself from Denmark and deepen its dependence on Danish expertise in response to the pandemic. However, the fact that those remote island societies with geographies, governmental systems, and settlement patterns most closely resembling those of Kalaallit Nunaat also generally possess histories of colonisation complicates efforts to distinguish between the impacts of being a remote island and being a colonised remote island.

Who can say whether, for example, the Pacific island countries of Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu—all of which, as of 21 April, have instituted travel restrictions and report no confirmed Covid-19 cases—would be responding any differently to the pandemic were they not majority Indigenous territories that were (with the arguable exception of Tonga) subjected to European colonialism. Certainly, remote island communities that were not subject to European colonialism of a similar nature (e.g. Australia's Norfolk Island and the UK Overseas Territories in the South Atlantic) have implemented similar travel restrictions, though such territories have populations and land areas much smaller than those of most of the colonised island states and autonomous territories.

Meanwhile, highly militarised or securitised territories struggle to exploit remote island geography in the same manner. Christmas Island, an Australian external territory, has become a Covid-19 quarantine site for Australia. Similarly, Guåhån (Guam), a highly autonomous Pacific island territory of the USA, with its own history of changes in disease and healthcare

due to colonisation (Hattori 2004; Prasad and Kurland 2017), could at least theoretically aspire to keep Covid-19 beyond its borders. After taking quick efforts to contain the virus, Guåhån has become a quarantine site for thousands of USA military personnel from the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, an aircraft carrier that was stricken by large numbers of Covid-19 cases (Letman 2020, April 9). This has had knock-on effects on other Pacific island communities depending on flights from Guåhån, such as the Northern Mariana Islands, another USA territory. As with many other policy areas, there is always the potential for the geopolitical concerns of the metropole to override the interests of island societies: remote island territories may be particularly likely to enjoy a degree of autonomy and independent decisionmaking power, but their interests may also be particularly easy for the metropole to overlook.

This highlights the manner in which the challenges and opportunities related to island geography often overlap. The Pacific island state of Vanuatu has reported no cases of Covid-19 as of 21 April—although testing has not been widespread—yet on 5 April, Cyclone Harold, a Category 5 storm, passed over the archipelago, causing extensive damage in both the capital of Port Vila and other islands—precisely at a time when Vanuatu will struggle to receive support from or the attention of the international community (McGarry 2020, April 9). The situation is, of course, even more serious for island states and territories that, like Fiji, have been hit by both the storm and the virus (Lyons 2020, April 8). Similarly, Caribbean island states and territories are struggling with food insecurity and economic collapse due to the closure of borders and breaking of supply chains from the USA (Ewing-Chow 2020, March 31).

Island communities, however small and remote they are or are assumed to be, must innovate and adapt to global issues, as they have always done (Kelman, Burns and des Johannson 2015). For the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not just about the challenges of dealing with diseases—as has been well-documented in the Pacific for infectious diseases (Roth et al.

2014)—but also the sudden changes in economies, such as almost no tourism and an expected drastic fall in remittances as the island diaspora lose their jobs. The full implications of any changes to imports and exports, such as trying to screen or disinfect for the virus, are also not known.

All these challenges affect all locations. The research questions for island studies, epidemiology, and disaster research include: 1) whether different types of islands used or could have used any isolation or remoteness traits (such as Kalaallit Nunaat's limited international flights and cruises) to counter the pandemic and 2) whether island population characteristics make islanders more susceptible to the disease, or mortality for it. Both questions have been investigated for islands for the 1918-1920 Spanish flu pandemic (e.g. Mamelund 2011; McLeod et al. 2008) and the 2009 A(H1N1) influenza pandemic (Kool et al. 2013). Discussion of these questions cannot overlook geopolitical factors, which may render particular islands more or less likely to restrict transport, solicit external support, come together in solidarity, or possess the necessary machinery of governance to craft a localised response to pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, isolation is just one factor affecting how islands are exposed to and react to infectious disease; geopolitics matter too.

Kalaallit Nunaat has so far triumphed over the 2020 pandemic more or less in isolation. Yet Covid-19, like Kalaallit Nunaat itself, does not exist in isolation. It is created through and perpetuated by relations among peoples, places, and institutions. When Kalaallit Nunaat someday—probably sooner, rather than later—resumes its air transport links with Denmark, re-enters the shuddering world economy, and resumes its place in the global flow of people

and products, the disease or a variant might reappear. There is every chance that Kalaallit Nunaat's success at eradicating Covid-19 will prove only temporary.

The coronavirus pandemic will nevertheless have changed Kalaallit Nunaat's geopolitics. The people of Kalaallit Nunaat will have a better idea of how much they owe to Denmark, how much they owe to themselves, and what opportunities exist for future relations with other countries and territories. They will also have a better idea of how Nuuk and the SNIJ's other towns and settlements relate to one another. Centres of power may be changing or shifting, both externally and internally. Indeed, it is increasingly being mooted, both in Kalaallit Nunaat and abroad, whether one result of the pandemic will be a long-term decrease in global connectivity.

The precise results of the present situation will only become clear in the future, once the situation has further developed. Further research will be needed in the coming months and years, research that can consider these issues in retrospect. But as long as there is a community of Kalaallit Nunaat, the archipelago's story will never be complete. It will always be developing, in relation.

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