Greenland: History and Society[1]

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Greenland, with its 56,000 inhabitants, is geographically and culturally part of the North American continent. The island represents the neck and head of the turtle, which in the mythology of many indigenous peoples of North America is recognized in the landmass (*Turtle Island*), whose imaginary tail is Mexico and whose extremities form the peninsulas of Alaska, Newfoundland, Baja California and Florida (Braune 2020). The flight distance between the capital Nuuk and Iqaluit, the capital of the Inuit-majority Canadian territory of Nunavut, is less than a quarter of the distance to Denmark, from where the vast majority of goods sold in shops, materials processed on construction sites, and a considerable proportion of the country's academic and professional workforce still originate. The proximity that still exists between Greenland and Denmark in the 21st century is therefore not geographical, but historical. The same applies to Greenland's political affiliation with the Nordic region. If one looks at Greenland in the context of an article in a Northern Europe handbook, it is primarily the Danish colonial history that explains the current political and cultural ties between the world's largest island and its inhabitants and the northern European country.

Medieval cultural contacts

The first Scandinavians to settle in Greenland and give it its current name were Icelandic settlers at the end of the 10th century, who first raised cattle in two areas near the present-day towns of Qaqortoq and Nuuk and later, when the climate became less favorable, became skilled sealers. In 1261 they made a treaty with King Håkon Håkonsen, which formally placed them under the Norwegian crown and guaranteed them a regular supply of European goods such as grain.

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The outbreak of the plague severed the vital link to Bergen, which remains the historical background for the Danish claim to sovereignty over Greenland. This circumstance is one of several causes discussed in research for the economic decline and disappearance of the first Scandinavian settlement culture in Greenland in the mid-15th century (Gulløv 2004).

The Inuit of the Thule culture whom the Norse settlers encountered in Greenland had migrated across the strait between Ellesmere Island and the area around the present North Greenlandic settlement of Qaanaaq around 1200, as had several Palaeo-Inuit cultures in the two and a half thousand years before. They are the ancestors of today's Greenlanders. With their technology perfectly adapted to the harsh living conditions - dog sleds, kayaks, umiaks and seasonal nomadism - they were the first immigrants to survive permanently in the Greenlandic Arctic. Their family structure was complementary: the men went hunting, the women processed the game into food, clothing, building materials and almost all the utensils needed for everyday life. The worldview was holistic; even inanimate objects were believed to have a soul. The omnipresence of danger - lack of prey, cold, accidents - fostered a worldview populated by numerous spirit beings and characterized by strict taboo rules, within which shamans possessed the ability to mediate between the mundane and spiritual spheres. The social recitation of mythical stories, often with moralistic intentions, served to pass on to future generations the ancestral knowledge that was important for survival (Kreutzmann 2018; Sonne 2018).

Early modern expeditions

In 1536, Norway, including its North Atlantic islands, became a Danish province. Although there had long been no connection with Greenland, it was known in early modern Copenhagen that the west coast of Greenland was inhabited by Inuit. As early as 1578, the English navigator Martin Frobisher had kidnapped Inuit from Baffin Island in search of raw materials and the Northwest Passage. His compatriot John Davis was the first to lead a group of Greenlanders to Europe in 1587, but they did not survive the voyage. The Danish Crown's interest in reestablishing a connection to and claiming sovereignty over Greenland, which began around 1600, was thus driven by economic and geopolitical interests and can be understood as a reaction to the increasing activities of English explorers and Dutch whalers in Arctic waters. The first Danish expedition to Greenland took place in 1605, with the aim of determining the fate of possible descendants of the Norse

settlers, and Greenlandic Inuit were brought back to Copenhagen. Since 1654, the *Kongelige Kunstkammer* had the portraits of four Greenlanders, which provided information about the appearance, clothing and weapons of the Inuit (Harbsmeier 2001).

The beginning of colonization

Greenland became a colony in 1721. With possessions in India, West Africa and the Caribbean, the Danish Empire was already present on almost every continent. After many years of preparation and convincing the church and court, Hans Egede, a missionary from Norway's Lofoten Islands, crossed the North Atlantic and settled near present-day Nuuk. Given Egede's motivation, historiography has sometimes exaggerated his interest in the history of Norse settlement. This has created a narrative that is often reproduced in popular science and the media and is still widespread among Greenlanders. According to this narrative, it was only the unexpected absence of Scandinavian descendants that made Egede turn to the Inuit. The image of Egede as a comic figure who searches unsuccessfully for lost Vikings and, for lack of anything else to do, begins to read the Bible to the Inuit is in line with Hayden White's (1978) narratological theories, according to which literary forms such as comedy and tragedy are inherent not only in drama but also in historiography. From a cultural-historical point of view, the question arises as to the function of a historiography that denies the intention of Egede's missionary project and thus gives the colonization and mission of the Inuit an accidental, even innocent character. It allows for a discursive distancing from colonization and its protagonists as such, in order to foreground instead the supposedly humanitarian achievements of later phases of colonial history, and can thus be read as a variant of Nordic colonial exceptionalism, according to which Danish colonization appears mild and altruistic, an interpretation that gained importance in the 20th century and is still in force today.

A study of Egede's writings, however, suggests that the missionary was aware before he left that he would not meet any Catholic Scandinavians on the west coast of Greenland. In his writings he also refers extensively to the successes of the Danish East India Mission, which began at the same time as he graduated from Copenhagen University and served as a model for Egede. Thus, when Egede, who was familiar with the concept of foreign missions, speaks in his writings of

"savages" among whom he wanted to spread Reformed Christianity, he certainly had the Inuit in mind.

Egede stayed only 15 years in the country, leaving in 1736, disillusioned not least because of a smallpox epidemic that had killed most of the Inuit living around the Godthåb colony. Three years earlier, the mission project had also faced competition from the pietistic Moravian Church, which remained active in Greenland until 1900 and soon enjoyed great popularity among the Inuit, but was often at odds with Egede on theological issues (Petterson 2022). The mission was continued by Egede's sons Poul and Niels, who grew up in Greenland and spoke the Inuit language, which was difficult for Europeans to learn. During their time, the colonial trading system was consolidated. Within a few decades, many other trading posts were established between Upernavik in the north and Julianehåb (Qaqortoq) in the south. East and North Greenland - the area around the settlement of Thule (Qaanaaq) - were not colonized until 1882 and 1910 respectively, the latter on the initiative of the Danish-Greenlandic polar explorer Knud Rasmussen.

Trade and colonial politics

With the colonization of the west coast, Greenland became part of a global trading empire, and the subsistence economy of hunting was subjected to the market logic of globalized colonial capitalism. In 1774, the Danish finance minister Heinrich Carl Schimmelmann, who had made his fortune as a plantation owner and major shareholder in the Danish West India Company, persuaded the mentally ill King Christian VII to invest in a whaling fleet to compete with the Dutch and British, who had been hunting in the North Atlantic for decades. But before Denmark could catch up with the other maritime powers in whaling, the stocks were so depleted that the country turned instead to the capitalization of sealing, which led Danish traders and the Inuit into a relationship of mutual dependency. The merchants depended on the cooperation of the kayak hunters. The valuable blubber of their prey illuminated the streets of growing European metropolises for a century. The Inuit, on the other hand, had quickly become accustomed to European guns, so they had a hard time relearning the technique of collective harpoon hunting when Denmark lost its fleet upon entering the Napoleonic Wars in 1807, and Greenland's supply of ammunition and other goods was cut off.

The caesura of the war marked the end of the heyday of Danish colonialism, a period that also saw the institutionalization of a colonial economy in

Greenland. In 1776, the Royal Greenland Trade (KGH) had taken over the administration of the island; the merchants were now also colonial officials. At the same time, a trade monopoly, which lasted until 1950, was introduced to prevent trade between Inuit and European sailors. From 1782, the "Instrux for Greenland" regulated everyday, even intimate, contact between Inuit and commercial officials. The latter could not be avoided, but remained a thorn in the side of trade. It was in the economic interest of the monopoly trade that all young men were trained as kayak hunters, a talent that only Inuit fathers could pass on to their sons.

Culture-preserving colonialism

Nineteenth-century colonial policy, which was critical of civilization, was characterized by the preservation of the sealing culture and the extensive shielding of the Greenlanders from supposedly harmful Western influences. Initially, this was done for economic reasons (Thomsen 1998), but later the paternalistic practice served to keep at a distance the Greenlanders who were gradually assimilating to a European lifestyle and demanding modernization (Rud 2017a). Maintaining cultural differences between the groups was a crucial means of discursively legitimizing the exercise of colonial power. In retrospect, however, culture-preserving colonial policies appear as evidence of a supposedly benign colonization, for example in comparison to the extensive extermination of indigenous cultures in the Americas. The same applies to the local councils established by colonial inspector Hinrich Rink in 1857, which were intended to ensure efficient sealing through a system of rewards and sanctions, but have also been interpreted as an early form of democratic participation. However, even they do not support the claim of colonial exceptionalism; in an international comparison, the transfer of power and jurisdiction to local elites can be seen as a common measure to preserve colonial authority (Conrad 2012). The appointment of particularly skilled hunters as overseers and the public denunciation of the less able, a practice that made use of the precolonial tradition of shaming, led to the formation of class distinctions previously unknown in Greenland and must be seen as a strategy of *divide et impera* (Rud 2017b).

The Rink years also saw the establishment of a monthly newspaper and a printing press, institutions that the now largely literate Greenlanders used in the nation-building process that was now beginning. In addition to the members of the councils, the catechists, who were trained as local assistants in education and mission, formed another elite. Later, opinionated politicians and writers such as

Mathias Storch and Augo Lynge emerged from their ranks (Thuesen 1988; Volquardsen 2011). Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (2004) have pointed to the ambivalent position of such colonial elites. Intended as loyal pillars of the colonial project, they were able to gain a considerable amount of agency as the administration relied on intermediaries and translators. In the face of the paternalism that inhibited progress, the acquisition of Western manners and the Danish language offered a subversive potential that they could use to overcome dependencies and power asymmetries. Thus, from 1900 onwards, Greenlandic intellectuals, hoping to achieve equality, advocated the modernization of society along Danish lines, a demand that the colonial administration at the time did not support, since it would have challenged the legitimacy of the colonial civilizing mission based on the assertion of cultural difference (Thisted 2021).

The United States entered Greenland's history indirectly in 1917. With the West Indies Purchase Treaty, they recognized Denmark's sovereignty over all of Greenland, which Denmark first claimed internationally in 1921. Until then, colonies had been spoken of in the plural, referring to the individual trading posts. After the sale of the West Indies, Greenland became Denmark's last colony in official usage. After territorial disputes with Norway over parts of the east coast, the Permanent Court of International Justice in The Hague confirmed Denmark's sovereignty over the entire island in 1933.

The Second World War and political decolonization

World War II brought Greenland to the center of American attention as a strategic military beachhead. The United States set up military airfields and took over the country's supply lines when Denmark’s Nazi occupation cut the link to Copenhagen. For the Greenlanders, who were shielded by monopolies and travel restrictions, the soldiers stationed in the country and access to American goods represented a social opening that they did not want to lose after the end of the war. Nevertheless, the relationship with the United States, which remained present in Greenland during the Cold War, remained ambivalent. The American airbase at Thule, which was built in 1953 and for which the North Greenlandic Inughuit were forcibly resettled - an injustice for which they were only sparingly compensated in 1999 - is still used today for global missile surveillance. The secret tolerance of nuclear weapons at Thule triggered one of the most serious political scandals in Danish post-war history.

Denmark responded to the United Nations' call for decolonization by incorporating Greenland as a formally equal province, which was accomplished with the adoption of a new constitution in 1953. To this day it is disputed whether the Greenlandic authorities agreed to this far-reaching step on an informed basis (Hermann 2021). The change of status was accompanied by a paradigm shift in Danish Greenland policy: The aim was to adapt the lifestyle of the new Danish citizens in the North to the standards of the Danish welfare state as quickly as possible. This was followed by a policy of infrastructural and linguistic assimilation imposed from Copenhagen and at least tolerated by Greenlandic politicians, which paradoxically led many Greenlanders to experience this period as the actual beginning of colonial foreign rule, not least because of the rapidly increasing number of Danish workers in the country (Sørensen 1984). The politician and women's rights advocate Guldborg Chemnitz has powerfully described how her generation was "inculcated from childhood with both great admiration for and fear of the Danes" (Chemnitz 1964: 17), which led to a widespread and difficult to overcome belief in authority (ibid.).

Postcolonial Greenland

The 1970s saw what sociologist Stuart Hall describes as a general development in postcolonial societies: Greenlanders, faced with a persistent experience of injustice, laid to rest the "liberal-assimilationist dream" (Hall 2018: 108) and demanded to become "citizens with equal rights within the political community while remaining culturally distinct" (ibid.). The politicization of a young generation opposed to the wage gap between Danes and Greenlanders, forced relocations and the threat of loss of language and culture was followed by the implementation of Home Rule in 1979, which gave Greenland its own government and parliament. A further step towards autonomy was taken in 2009 with the adoption of the Self Government Act. Since then, Denmark has recognized the Greenlanders as a people under international law and has pledged not to stand in the way of a possible future declaration of independence by the country.

However, the Danish government contributes an annual block grant of half a billion euros to Greenland's budget, an amount that can hardly be compensated by Greenland's own resources, thus keeping the country in a one-sided dependency relationship and de facto standing in the way of the independence desired by the majority of Greenlanders. Thisted et al. (2021) argue, with reference to

Sara Ahmed's theories on affect economies, that it is not least this contribution, often understood in Danish discourse as an altruistic gift, that leads to criticism of Denmark and demands for more autonomy being interpreted as ingratitude, a view that, however, seems to be gradually changing, not least among political decision makers.

Greenland's postcolonial relationship with Denmark is increasingly being replaced by a global network of power relations and geopolitical tensions, as the United States, Russia and China compete for economic and political dominance in the region. The changing geopolitical landscape culminated in 2019 with US President Donald Trump's attempt to buy Greenland. Although the idea was brusquely rejected, the event could contribute to a realignment of the Greenland-Denmark relationship. It forces Denmark to recognize that the annual block grant, previously understood as a subsidy, must be seen more as the market value of what nations are willing to pay in exchange for a military and commercial presence in Greenland. It turns out that Denmark pays a comparatively small amount to secure its geostrategic position, a finding that challenges age-old narratives of benevolent Danes and ungrateful Greenlanders (Körber/Volquardsen 2020).

Politics of history and mental decolonization

Changes are also taking place in the field of politics of memory. After the Danish government saw no reason in 2013 to participate in a reconciliation commission initiated by the Greenlandic government to address the injustices committed during the colonial period and beyond (Andersen 2019), Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen traveled to Nuuk in 2022 to officially apologize to the survivors of the so-called "experiment" of 1951. At that time, a group of children were sent to Denmark and permanently separated from their families in order to mold them into future achievers through Danish education, a measure that, as is often said, was carried out with the best of intentions but turned out to be disastrous for those affected (Thiesen 2023). In conversations in Nuuk, Frederiksen learned that the "experiment" was by no means a failed exception, but rather part of a socio-political system that made many of the Greenlanders who grew up in the post-war decades experience displacement, disenfranchisement and interference by the authorities, whether through school, boarding school and hospital stays in Denmark (often accompanied by the experience of racism), dubious adoption practices or the denial of the right to identify and inherit illegitimate fathers, who often

came from Denmark. The most recent revelation of colonial biopolitics was the often non-consensual implantation of contraceptives in thousands of girls and young women from 1965 until recently. In response to the latest revelations, the Danish and Greenlandic governments agreed in the summer of 2022 to set up a commission to examine the policies of the post-war decades with the aim of reconciliation.

One reason for the change of course on the part of official Denmark may be the realization that avoiding a future independence of Greenland presupposes a respectful relationship and a departure from the exceptionalist self-image of having been a benevolent colonial power. In both countries, the gradual recognition of the need for mental decolonization also plays a role. Demands to overcome intergenerational trauma and internalized colonial thought patterns, which Greenlandic authors have been addressing for some time (Lynge 2008; Petersen 2019), seem to have reached critical mass at the latest in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter movement. Addressing persistent colonial structures is becoming less taboo. The revival of cultural techniques that were discredited in colonial times, such as drum dancing and facial tattooing, as well as discussions about the recognition of indigenous epistemology in science, testify to a self-conscious revaluation of self-identification as Greenlandic and the performative renunciation of the shame that colonial discourse often associated with this identity position. These practices are just a few examples of a process of mental decolonization that is reaching broader segments of the population and thus has the potential to have an emancipatory effect on future social developments and to promote Greenlanders' ongoing reconciliation with their own history, which continues to reverberate in the present.

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