

## Notes on the Colonial History of Greenland

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### Footnote:

Kalaallit Nuunat, the Greenlandic name for Greenland means "the people's land" and Kalaallit "the people." However, Kalaallit often refer to themselves as Greenlanders and their language as Greenlandic, and these are the terms I will use in this dissertation. The name Greenland, or in Danish 'Grønland,' was given to the enormous island by the Norse Erik the Red when he first saw the deep and fertile fjords of southern Greenland (Mikkelsen & Kuipjers, 2000). Prior to Greenland's vote on self-government there was an article in the newspaper *Sermitsiaq* and subsequently heated online debate among readers about the terms Inuit and Kalaallit, on account of a question from Doris Jacobsen, who is a member of the Home Rule government in the Greenlandic parliament, about whether Greenlanders should call themselves Kalaallit or Inuit with the advent of self-government (Aaqjissuisoqarfik, 2008). The majority of debaters seemed to agree that the proper name for Greenlanders, in Greenlandic today, is Kalaallit. This despite the fact that Greenlanders are ethnohistorically of Inuit descent, and that the origin of Kalaallit (singular: kalaaleq) may be *skræling*, which some sources point to as meaning skin in the Icelandic language, with reference to the skin clothing that the Inuit wore when the Norse first encountered them (Gulløv, 2000). According to other sources, *skræling* originates in the Scandinavian languages and means scrawny, which is how the Norse described the first Inuit they met (Gulløv, 2000). In modern Danish (and Norwegian) the word *skrælling* means weakling, and the historical origin of the word in the dictionary is connected to the word Eskimo (Vinterberg & Bodelsen, 1998, p. 1884).

### **2.1.2 Greenland**

Greenland or Kalaallit Nuunat is the world's largest island, the majority of which lies above the Arctic Circle. Greenland's landmass is 2,175,600 km<sup>2</sup>, but only 341,700 km<sup>2</sup> or 15% is habitable because of the ice cap (Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 2008a). Its population has been stable for the last 8 years and was 56,648 in 2007, approximately 89% of whom are ethnically Inuit and self-identify as Kalaallit/Greenlanders with the last 11% of the population being mostly ethnically Danish (Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 2008b). Eighty-five percent of the Inuit speak Greenlandic/Kalaallisut, an Inuit language, as their mother tongue, and Danish as their second language.<sup>30</sup>

The population of Greenland lives in 16 towns and 56 villages. Similar to Nunavut, Greenland is divided into regions. The majority of Greenland's population (approximately 50%) including the majority of ethnic Danes (both those born in and those living in Greenland for shorter or longer periods) live in the "middle region" which is also called the "open water region" and is comprised of the hamlets of Paamiut, Nuuk (the capital), Maniitsoq and Sisimiut. Approximately 19% of the population lives in the "Disco region" that includes the hamlets of Kangaatsiaq, Aasiaat, Qasignianguit, Qeqertarsuaq and Ilulissat. About 17% live in the "hunter regions" that include the hamlets of Umannaq, Upernavik, Ammassalik and Ittoqqortoormiit; about 14% live in the "southern region" comprised of Nanortalik, Qaqortoq and Narsaq hamlets (Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 2008 b).

Greenland spans from 59,46 N to 83,39 N and covers 3 time zones. This means that, like in Nunavut, climactic and other conditions vary significantly. Although jets fly to and from Greenland, scheduled transportation between towns and villages is by boats, helicopters and smaller aircraft (Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 2008a). The availability of fresh produce, goods and services varies greatly between the major towns and smaller villages, and also varies based on proximity to Nuuk. Prices for food are generally 1.5 to 3 times more than those in Denmark (Petersen, 2007). All towns in Greenland have at least one store where it is possible to buy food, clothing, and everything else needed on a daily basis and many towns also have one or more stores selling local arts and crafts. Many larger towns have several different stores and Nuuk has several stores similar to those found in Copenhagen, Denmark, selling things such as clothes, household items, jewellery, furniture, building material, and various forms of arts and crafts.

In some of the larger towns in Greenland it is also possible to find treatment or health maintenance options alternative to the health care system, including weight loss programmes, foot therapy, reflexology, chiropractic, massage, physiotherapy, fitness centres, yoga and other body maintenance classes, as well as coaching, psychotherapy and traditional Inuit psychic healing (Nuuk Ugeavis, 2009). Nuuk, however, is the town with most choices. All towns in Greenland have schools, although some of the smaller ones continue only to grade 7. Only the larger towns have high schools and post secondary educational possibilities and most of the latter are situated in Nuuk.

As opposed to conditions in Nunavut, indoor plumbing and running water are not available in all small villages and the quality of family dwellings in small villages can be poor (Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 2008a). As in Nunavut and particularly Iqaluit, there are vast differences between dwellings in Greenland. Particularly in Nuuk, quality of dwellings varies significantly – from very new, large and very expensive one-family homes in some areas, older two-story or high-rise apartment buildings that look rundown and in need of care, to very small wooden one family dwellings that look even more in need of maintenance. Social conditions also vary greatly, both between and within towns and villages. In contrast to some immigrant groups in European countries, in Greenland it is the recent immigrant<sup>31</sup> Danes and first, second and even third generation Danes living in Greenland rather than Inuit Greenlanders who generally hold privilege, both in terms of educational attainment and economic wealth (although over the past few decades a well-off Inuit Greenlandic elite has also formed). The difference between the wealthiest and poorest is dramatic. In 2003 the wealthiest 10% of families with one child had a yearly income of CDN \$200,000 and the poorest 10% of families with one child had a yearly income of CDN \$16,000 (Wulff, 2006). Most of the employment opportunities are available in Nuuk.

## **2.2 Histories of Colonization and Roads to Self-Determination**

### **2.2.1 Greenland**

Although Greenland may have already been visited in the 800s (Sigurdson, 2000) the history of European colonization in Greenland started with the Norse in the 900s. While trade and bartering did exist between Greenlandic Inuit and whalers after the demise of the Norse settlements in the early 1400s, serious colonial activities began with Christian missions in 1721 led by the Danish missionary Hans Egede (Arnborg & Seaver, 2000; Dahl, 2000). Egede, who established the first Danish-Norwegian colonial station in Greenland, close to present-day Nuuk, was involved in activities beyond missions as well; since “Danish colonial policy was based on mission *and* trade” the activities of Egede was as well (Dahl, 2000, p. 31, emphasis added).

Egede had expected to meet the descendants of the population of the Norse that settled in Greenland between the 980s and 1300. It was his goal to reintroduce these later generations of immigrant Norse to Christianity. Upon landing on Håbets Ø (Hope Island) he did not meet any descendants of the Norse but rather “Eskimoes”.<sup>32</sup> It did not take Egede long to realise that in order to convert the Inuit to Christianity, literacy would be necessary. The Evangelic-Lutheran faith, to which Egede subscribed, demanded that the individual had to personally consider and agree with various individual components of the faith. This meant that either it was necessary for Egede to learn Greenlandic, have a bible translated into Greenlandic, and teach the Greenlanders basic literary skills, or it was necessary for Greenlanders to learn to speak and then read Danish. Both seemed insurmountable problems (Gad, 1965). Egede did teach some Greenlandic children Danish. He also chose a few of his students to be catechists, in order for them to support him in his missionary endeavours. Already in 1727, Egede proposed that seminaries should be built in all Greenlandic colonies<sup>33</sup> and that they could be used to educate catechists *and* as a means to cultivate “Eskimoes” to become more Western in their ways and thinking. Throughout the 1700s the need for catechists grew, as Greenlanders all over Greenland converted to Christianity. This led to the establishment of a few small seminaries. Although the number of graduates from these remained relatively small, the goal of Westernizing and schooling the Greenlandic Inuit was certainly made easier with the aid of the Greenlandic catechists – both those educated in Greenland and the few who went to school in Denmark (Gad, 1965).

In the late 1700s more local educational initiatives emerged, partly because the children, and particularly the boys born of immigrant Danish men and Greenlandic women, were not naturally taught traditional occupations. Furthermore, it was proposed by a governor of the trading company that the trades positions that were necessary in Greenland should be held by Greenlanders rather than immigrant Danes. This resulted in 13 Greenlanders receiving training in Denmark, 12 as different tradespeople and one as a priest. They returned to Greenland between 1837 and 1848. Also, two seminaries were established in the mid-1800s that have continued to educate catechists and teachers until the present

day. At the same time, several women were sent to Denmark to be educated as midwives (Gad, 1965).

After the mid-1800s, Hinrik Rink, a Danish scientist who in 1885 became both the colony manager in Godthaab today Nuuk and the director of South Greenland, further developed the idea of Greenlanders being educated in Denmark (Steenstrup, 1894). This initiative resulted in 31 Greenlandic men being educated as tradespeople between 1874 and 1891. Prior to this and occurring simultaneously, many Greenlanders received less formalised training in various trades and public institutions within Greenland. In 1870 native Greenlanders “were performing most of the semi-skilled tasks in the larger settlements and managing trade stations in two or three minor outposts” (Ostermann, cited in Jenness, 1967, p. 54). By 1880, 95 % of the people employed within the church and school systems in Greenland were Greenlanders and 72% of the people employed in the trading company were as well (Berthelsen, cited in Gad, 1965, p. 259).

It is thought that the schooling that had commenced with Hans Egede contributed to Greenlanders being able to obtain this education and these positions (Gad, 1965). By 1850, due to the efforts of the Moravian missionary Samuel Kleinsmith, Greenland already had a standardised writing system using Roman orthography as the base (Dorais, 1993). This was to Rink’s advantage when he established the first Greenlandic newspaper *Atuagagdliutit* in 1861. The paper was written in Greenlandic, often by Greenlandic people, and it discussed matters important to Greenlanders; it was printed in Nuuk by a Greenlander, who was trained by Rink (Jenness, 1967; Steenstrup, 1894). By 1950, essentially all Greenlanders were literate in Greenlandic (Jenness, 1968). Although in a slightly different form, the newspaper still operates today, almost 250 years after its inception. In 1952 it was amalgamated with another local paper ‘Grønlandsposten’, which was written in Danish. The current paper is bilingual, called *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten A/G*, and is generally referred to as AG (*Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten*, 2008).

Rink’s initiatives have been thought to be spurred by a concern for the welfare and love of Greenland and Greenlanders (Steenstrup, 1894). Simultaneously, his aim was to “better” the Greenlanders (Gad, 1965) and raise their status and morale by giving them an ‘authoritative voice’ in local administration with an eye to future self-government (Jenness, 1967). Acculturation inevitably resulted. Although the stated policy of the Danish Government throughout its colonial rule was that the Greenlandic people should maintain their traditional hunting way of life (Dahl, 2005) the colonies, by their mere existence and cooperation with the missions, and particularly the increasing educational initiatives, slowly and intentionally brought change to the Greenlandic way of living and thinking (Gad, 1965).

Trade and trading arrangements also brought about major changes. The

Kongelige Grønlandsk Handelskompagni (the Royal Greenland Trade Company) or KGH was owned by the Danish state and played a major role. The main objective of its protectionist approach was to “seek the best interest and advantage of the Royal Trade and Fishing with diligence and zeal” (Gad, cited in Nuttall, 1992, p. 18). The Danish Government attempted to ensure this by limiting – in effect forbidding – trade between Greenlanders and all others. Despite this approach, contact with European whalers and traders did take place (Jenness, 1967). This contact, coupled with trade and contact with the KGH, led Greenlanders to be increasingly dependent on foreign trade goods and technology and also increasingly on Danes (Nuttall, 1992). Later, with the United States recognizing Danish sovereignty over Greenland in 1941 and the subsequent development of American military bases there, the Danish government abandoned its “isolationist policies towards Greenland” (Nuttall, 1992, p. 18) further increasing Greenland’s contact with the surrounding world and the Greenlandic people’s access to trade goods.

Because of the conditions of the sea, sea ice, and general geography, East Greenland is and was less accessible to visitors and prospective colonizers (Søby, 1983). Therefore, the history of colonization in East Greenland is somewhat different than that in West Greenland. East Greenland was colonized by Denmark early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost 200 years later than West Greenland. It started in Ammassalik (now called Tasiilaq) in August 1884. Gustav Holm, a naval officer and Arctic explorer, sailed from Southeast Greenland with *umiaks* or ‘women’s boats’ filled with female rowers, equipment, food, tents, and other supplies, followed by men in kayaks (Mikkelsen, 1994). His mission was to map and scientifically describe the Eastern coast of Greenland. Because of the means of transportation, the expedition was called “konebådsekspeditionen” the Danish for ‘women-boat expedition’ (Mikkelsen, 1994).

Holm met the Inuit who lived in the Ammassalik district, and aided by the Greenlander Johan Petersen, he conducted ethnographic research. He subsequently published work describing the Ammassalik Inuit. After successfully completing his mission, Holm left in 1885, but not before he had promised the Ammassalimmiut<sup>34</sup> that he would return and help alleviate the dire conditions under which they lived. Due to hunger, 32 people had died between 1883 and 1884, and another 30 who had migrated north in order to find better hunting grounds had also succumbed. Many historical reports from Eastern Greenland give evidence of the devastating results of foreign diseases brought by whalers and traders (Mathiassen, 1935). When Holm departed in 1885, the population of Ammassalik had totaled 413 people. When he returned in 1894, only 243 people remained. Many had abandoned hope that conditions would improve and left. About 100 previous inhabitants, however, returned to the Ammassalik area when they learned that a trading station had been built (Mikkelsen, 1994).

Before Holm returned in 1894 after convincing Danish administrators about the need for another mission to Eastern Greenland, a Norwegian trading

expedition had visited the settlement and bought everything that the population had collected to trade with Holm when he returned (Mikkelsen, 1994). Holm described how the Ammassalimmiut had changed appearance in the 9 years that had passed since he left. Many were wearing European clothing, often worn to rags, a development that Holm blamed on the Norwegians. After Holm returned to Ammassalik, a mission and trading station was built and colonization began in earnest. Despite hardship, epidemics of diseases, and an initial decline in Ammassalik's numbers, the population, according to Holm, began to thrive and grow. Thirty years later, in 1925, another expedition with 70 people from Ammassalik and a number of Danish builders set forth to colonize the area around Scoresbysund (today Ittoqqortoormiit), 1000 km further north (Mikkelsen, 1994).

This next step in the colonization of Eastern Greenland was the result of a dispute about sovereignty rights to Eastern Greenland between Denmark and Norway. In the public forum, however, it was said that further colonization was brought about for the sake of the Greenlanders (Mikkelsen, 1924, 1989). Ejnar Mikkelsen (1989), the founder of the colony, writes in his accounts that apart from an initial epidemic that left some community members dead and created a four-month hiatus of depression and inability to work among the settlers, the colonization enterprise went very well. Mikkelsen also writes that the colonizing party had to decline passage to several prospective Inuit settlers wanting to join the first trip to Scoresbysund, that those who went did so more than voluntarily, and that he encountered only happy and very content settlers when he returned to the community a year after its foundation. Pia Arke (2003), a descendant of one of the settlers, paints a different picture as she recounts the hardship settlers faced and writes that not all relocations were as voluntary as described by Mikkelsen. Thus since Scoresbysund was not colonized until 1925 it did not, logistically, remain a Danish colony for more than 33 years.

The colonial status of all of Greenland was abandoned in 1953, which in theory gave Greenlanders equal status to Danes (Nuttall, 1992), but colonization continued nonetheless (Balle, 2006; Nuttall, 1992). Greenlandic values, knowledge, and ways were increasingly devalued after the Second World and a heavy influx of Danish labourers, professionals, and administrators, and encouragement by the Danish Government, led many Greenlanders to abandon traditional hunting camps, hunting, and whaling in order to take up fishing. This change in policy was based on the "warming of Greenland's southern coastal waters," a subsequent migration of seals further north, and the appearance of fish, notably cod, in the warmer waters in the south (Nuttall, 1992, p. 19). The Government focused its attention and investment on the fishing industry in Central Western coastal towns where housing and schooling were made available. Settlements elsewhere were neglected, forcing inhabitants to move from the outlying districts and to send their children to schools in larger towns (Dahl, 2005). For some, compulsory school attendance meant several years of residence at boarding schools where, in some cases, only Danish could be spoken (Bryld,

1998).

The history and legacy of residential schools has seemed less dire in Greenland than in the Canadian Arctic (Anawak, 2009). Recently, however, there have been heated debates in the Danish and Greenlandic governments and media about 22 children who were relocated from Greenland to Denmark in the 1960s in order to attend school and become part of a new Greenlandic elite when reaching maturity. The children were taught in Danish according to Danish norms and values (Buch-Andersen, 2009), many never moved back to their native families and many lost the ability to speak their native language.<sup>35</sup>

With the increased influx of Danes in the 1960s the tension that already existed between Greenlanders and immigrant Danes grew, in part because of Greenlanders feeling discriminated against in terms of available jobs, payment and privileges compared to their Danish contemporaries. This feeling increased with the forced joining of the European Economic Community or EEC in 1972, a move that most Greenlanders voted against (Dahl, 2005). That Denmark, and by default Greenland, joined the EEC was seen by Greenlanders as further foreign rule being imposed upon them. This resulted in an intensified Greenlandic demand for autonomy from Denmark. In 1973 the Greenlandic Home Rule Committee was established with the aim of securing autonomy for Greenland. The Home Rule Committee drafted, adopted and submitted a report to the Danish Government that advocated for a regional (as opposed to ethnic) home rule government in Greenland. Subsequently a Danish-Greenlandic Home Rule Commission was established, the work of which resulted in all statutes proposed for Greenlandic Home Rule being adopted by the Danish parliament on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1979, at which time Greenlandic Home Rule began (Dahl, 2000). Ever since the advent of Home Rule there have been discussions, often heated, in Greenland, in Denmark and between Greenlandic and Danish politicians about Greenland obtaining self-government. This led to the development of a Greenlandic Commission for Greenlandic self-government in 2000. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003 a white paper was delivered to the Home Rule government after which negotiations took place between Denmark and Greenland about how to realize the content. On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004, a Danish/Greenlandic Commission for Greenlandic self-government was created, the work of which ended on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008 (KNR, 2008a). The task of the Commission was, according to the Greenlandic parliament, to: “1. Consider and propose how the Greenlandic government may take over further competence, where this is constitutionally possible. 2. Propose the legal terms for how this may be done including how to tackle the financial issues that exist between Denmark and Greenland” (Government of Greenland, 2009, para. 4). Part of the discussions between Denmark and Greenland in relation to the self-rule commission have revolved around Greenland’s dependency on transfer payments from Denmark and how they would decrease as Greenland gets revenue from extraction of subsoil and non-renewable resources. Greenland exerts its independence by negotiating terms of agreement with foreign business that will allow potential

extraction to occur (Nuttall, 2008), an ability that may be seen as decolonizing, since any extraction in Greenland until now has been a Danish colonial enterprise (Nuttall, 2008).

Since the establishment of the Commission and even before, the Greenlandic media published numerous articles and reader/listener discussions about what self-government would imply and what it would mean for the future of Greenland and a continued Greenlandic and Danish cooperation (see, for example, Gad, 2009a, 2009b; KNR, 2008a). On November 25, 2008 the Greenlandic population voted to accept the proposal that the Commission had put forth with 75% voting “yes” and 23% voting “no” (Mølgaard, 2009). On June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Greenland’s self-rule was affirmed and legislated by the Danish Queen and government (Magrethe R & Rasmussen, 2009). This further step of “self rule” rather than “home rule” has not settled the question of what the relationship between Denmark and Greenland should be; the debate continues among the population, politicians, and in academic circles in both Denmark and in Greenland (Gad, 2009a). Governments throughout the world as well as Inuit organizations congratulated Greenland on the day of their voting yes to enhanced self-determination. Canadian Inuit political leader Mary Simon (Nuttall, 2008) and Duane Smith, the president of the Canadian office of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, both saw Greenland’s yes as a “hope and opportunity for [other Inuit]... to gain better control of their own destinies” (Smith, 2008, p. 1). Although Greenland has widely been “considered a model for Indigenous government...it has been a process of nation building rather than an ethno political movement” (Nuttall, 2008, p. 65). Still, there are voices in the parliament and general population that assert ethnic Greenlandicness to be very important in relation to political decision-making and Greenland becoming independent, which is evidenced, for example, in discussions about language and identity between members of parliament from *Siumut*, which some call a ‘nationalist party,’ and *Demokraatit*, which on the other hand some accuse of wanting Greenland to be equivalent to a ‘discount Denmark’ (Berthelsen, 2010; Lybert, 2010; Thomsen, 2010).

As I will discuss in the following chapter, the people of Nunavut appear to be less in favour of becoming totally independent of Canada than many people in Greenland, who over time appear to favour independence from Denmark.

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