



Centre for the Critical Study of

# **Global Power and Politics**

## **National Identity in Greenland in the Age of Self-Government**

Naja Dyrendom Graugaard

Working Paper CSGP 09/5  
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada  
[www.trentu.ca/globalpolitics](http://www.trentu.ca/globalpolitics)

## Introduction

Greenland is undergoing significant changes in its relations to Denmark and its general position in the world. On June 21<sup>st</sup> 2009, a Self-Government arrangement will substitute the Greenlandic Home Rule, established 1979. The implementation of Greenlandic Self-Government is part of the process of decolonizing the relations between Denmark and Greenland which have been and still are, in many ways, characterized by domination. In a newspaper interview, Jonathan Motzfeldt, the former chairman of the Home Rule, talked of what he thought was the most important aspect of the Self-Government negotiation process: “That we are recognized as a people according to international law. The Danes would not allow that with the Home Rule negotiations in the 1970s. But now, we have succeeded. The Self-Government agreement recognizes us as a people with legal rights. Maybe this is an expression of a political mentality change among the Danes. They have probably gained a greater sense of the feelings which unite people. Political recognition is determinant for our self-respect” (own translation, Motzfeldt, Politiken, 2008, November 22).

In this paper, I analyze some of the national processes involved in the development of Greenland as a post-colonial nation, seeking to advance its possibilities of greater self-determination. My examination of Greenland revolves around the question of what it means for a ‘nation’ not to have an independent ‘state’. Such an examination must be tied to the relations between Greenland and Denmark. In my analysis, I question how Greenland emerged as a nation. This calls for a historical analysis of Danish colonialism which determines present day relations between Greenland and Denmark. The emergence of Greenland as a nation is connected to conceptualizations of Greenlandic national identity. The question of identity has been debated in Greenland throughout the last centuries. Thus, in my analysis, I question how conceptualizations of Greenlandic national identity reflect the colonial history and continued Danish dominance, the encounter between an Indigenous and a colonizing people, traditionalism, and new pressures for re-interpreting “Greenlandicness”. In this context, I furthermore

question the ways in which Greenland, as a post-colonial nation, is represented in Denmark. I analyze how Denmark is involved in the production and reproduction of images of Greenland *in* and *for* Denmark which position Danes as superior to Greenlanders. In this way, the essentialized images of Greenland as the Other reflects a “disguised” reproduction of colonial relations. My analytical questions are set in the empirical context of Greenland’s decolonization process.

I argue that the process towards greater Greenlandic self-determination requires critical analysis of the national processes involved in the development of Greenland as a post-colonial nation, as well as identification of power relationships and their history. The current implementation of Self-Government in Greenland constitutes a political moment that invites a rethinking and re-visioning of the (post-)colonial relations between Greenland and Denmark. My paper therefore speaks to both Greenlanders and Danes.

My analysis is based on three months of field research in Greenland in the summer of 2008. I spent two months in Greenland’s capital, Nuuk, as a guest student at Ilisimatusarfik (the University of Greenland), and one month in the smaller towns of the Greenlandic West-coast. During these three months, I was able to research literature on Greenland, conduct interviews, and study first-hand manifestations of national processes. At the time of my field research, the Danish-Greenlandic Self-Government Commission presented their proposal on Greenlandic self-governance that spurred new debates.

At the same time, my research is also based in the Danish context. Within the last year, the affairs of Greenland have increasingly surfaced in Danish public and political debates. This has exposed a general lack of awareness about Danish colonial history and revealed Danish hegemonic attitudes towards Greenland. From my experience, Danish national narratives ignore Denmark’s history as a colonial power and its consequences. For example, when I was taught about colonialism in primary and secondary school, I mainly learned about the colonial empires of Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Spain. However, little was said about Denmark’s role as a colonial exploiter in Greenland, Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, the West Indies, India and Africa. In fact, I learned that Denmark had been a “benign” colonial power in Greenland; we did not enslave the Indigenous population, and we did not implement physical punishment. I

learned that Denmark helped Greenlanders to alleviate the miseries of tuberculosis and poverty, even though I did not learn how these phenomena were related to Danish colonialism. I did not learn about Danish colonial policies, the complications arising from these, or the very exploitative and problematic nature of colonialism. I argue that these silences and inaccuracies in Danish national narratives constitute a major gap in the everyday consciousness of Danes, and remain to be challenged.

In a theoretical context, my analysis applies an inter-disciplinary approach, drawing on theories on political economy, nation-state formation, national identity, post-colonialism, and critical studies of “development” (see the description of my chapters for specific references).

The first chapter, “History of Greenland and Denmark Relations: The Forgotten Colonialism”, contextualizes present day inter-relations between Denmark and Greenland in a historical analysis of Danish colonialism in Greenland, the integration of Greenland into the Danish Realm, and the decolonization process up to the establishment of the Home Rule. I analyze the emergence of modern Greenland in a political economic perspective, drawing on world-systems theory (e.g. Wallerstein, *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction* 2004) and dependency theory (Frank, *The Development of Underdevelopment*, 1966).

The second chapter, “Perspectives on National Identity in Greenland”, analyzes different conceptualizations of “Greenlandicness” in Greenland. It discusses the ways in which the criteria of territory, language, ethnicity, indigeneity, tradition, and values are perceived by Greenlanders to constitute ‘Greenlandic forms of life’. I analyze Greenlandic national identity as a concept that has emerged along with the historical processes in which a global system of nation-states has been founded, drawing on the studies of Michael Billig (*Banal Nationalism*, 1996) and Anthony D. Smith (*Nationalism*, 2001).

The third chapter, “Representation of Greenland as a Form of Eskimo Orientalism”, analyzes the essentialized images of Greenland in Denmark as a process of Othering, reproducing colonial relations. I discuss the creation of “Greenland images” in Danish colonial history, as well as in the present-day media and recent literature on Greenland. This study is informed by post-colonial theory of Orientalism, mainly

referring to the work of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1979).

The fourth chapter, “Self-Government in Greenland”, describes and discusses the Self-Government agreement. I provide a discussion of the challenges to and possibilities of greater self-determination in the framework of the Greenlandic Self-Government arrangement. Here, I refer to critical studies of development.

With this paper, I hope to contribute to new dialogues both in Greenland and in Denmark, relating to the practice of Greenlandic self-determination and to a revisioning of the relations between Denmark and Greenland based on mutual respect.