

# History of Greenland and Denmark relations: The Forgotten Colonialism

## Historical Amnesia Revisited

[...] anyone who has thought that Greenland and Denmark, today, relate to each other as two equal nations should think twice. Because, Denmark does not consider Greenland as equal – because we, among other things, have never been aware that we have actively partaken in a colonial project (own translation, Sjølie, 2008, February 2)

This is a statement by Tone Olaf Nielsen who was co-curator of the post-colonial exhibition and conference project on *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*. Hansen and Nielsen, curators of the conference, argue that history continues to structure the Nordic societies today. They call the absence of the colonial history in Nordic collective memory “The Forgotten Colonialism” and “Nordic Amnesia”. The general lack of awareness concerning the fact that Denmark has actively partaken in a colonial project accommodates the perpetuation of colonial relations which “continu[e] to make [themselves] very much felt in the region’s former colonies” (Hansen & Nielsen, 2006, February). Gaining an understanding of the present day relations between Denmark and Greenland therefore necessitates an analysis of the colonial history.

Furthermore, I suggest that contextualizing present day relations between Greenland and Denmark in a historical framework is not only critical to Danish education, but also to the concepts of national identity and self-governance within Greenland today. As Petersen has put it, “if an idea is adopted by the colonized people themselves – both civil servants and other - it would then justify the colonization itself and also the presence of a colonial civil service. It would create a people who had lost belief in their own capacity. It would create a people that were thankful to be colonized” (Petersen, 1995: 122). The Greenlandic social anthropologist, Aviâja Egede Lyngé, stressed in her presentation paper, *The Best Colony in the World*, at the conference on

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism that it is crucial to re-vision the colonial history within Greenland in order to gain understanding of Greenlandic identity and nationalism (Lynge, 2006). In her opening remarks, she stated:

We have always been taught we were one of the best colonies in the world. No slavery, no killings. We learned it through Danish history books, and from Danish teachers. With the books telling us how fantastic a colony we were – books about primitive Eskimos, books written from Euro-centric, economic, or self-justifying angles – we haven't really looked beyond this historical oppression [...]. We went directly from being a colony into becoming a part of Denmark. We learned to be Danish and we learned to be thankful. Why, then, should we have had a reason to decolonise? And why should we have a reason to ask questions about the 250 years of colonial presence? (Lynge 2006: 1).

For the reasons discussed above, I argue that engaging in the present political moment in Greenland-Denmark relations necessitates an investigation of the centuries of colonial presence in Greenland and the emergence of Greenland as a post-colonial nation.

### **Theoretical Framework of the History of Greenland and Denmark Relations**

According to Barndt, engaging in a process of “naming the moment” should involve historical-structural analysis which “helps us identify the underlying power relationships and the deeper contradictions that determine the structure of our society in the long term” (Barndt, 1989: 8). In the rest of this chapter, I will engage in a structural analysis of Denmark-Greenland history, identifying some of the major political, economic, and socio-cultural forces involved in the historical emergence of modern Greenland.

In general terms, my analytical framework is informed by world systems theory (e.g. Immanuel Wallerstein, 2004), and dependency theory (e.g. Andre Gunder Frank, 1966). In this framework, the current states of affairs in “developing” countries are analyzed as results of a world-historical process in which the development of the “first world” ('developed market economies') is closely related to a process of subordinate development of the former. Frank called this phenomenon “development of

underdevelopment” (Frank, 1966). Over the past centuries capitalism spread and turned other areas into dependent satellites of the metropolitan centre. This process has been led by the main goals of seeking capital profits and accumulating capital. According to Wallerstein, those profits are generated by primary producers and appropriated through legal sanctions by capitalists. Wallerstein termed this relation an “unequal exchange” between core countries (Frank’s metropolis) and the periphery (Frank’s satellites). According to these theories, the current social, economic and political conditions of “less developed countries” are not explained as outcomes of the persistence of an “original” state, but as a consequence of historical capitalism (Leys, 1977: 92-93; Wallerstein, 2004: 12; Gunder Frank, 1966: 106). Importantly, Frank’s and Wallerstein’s work has challenged unquestioned beliefs in modernization, stages of growth, and traditional vs. modern society debates (Leys, 1977: 93; Wolf 1982: 23). One should be aware of certain shortcomings of a purely dependency/world-systems theoretical lens, which has been criticized for being unclear about the concepts of “development”, “exploitation”, and “imperialism” (Leys, 1977). Frank and Wallerstein have also been criticized for omitting the specificities about the range and variety of populations affected by the capitalist world system (Wolf, 1982: 23). On this note, it should be mentioned that there are ways in which the emergence of modern Greenland deviates from dependency/world-systems explanations (notably, Greenland is today not characterized as a “less developed country”). As all histories, Greenland’s history is complex and cannot be thoroughly assessed through a solely historical materialistic approach (or core-periphery analysis). Nonetheless, in a framework of world-systems theory it is possible to employ a uni-disciplinary approach, looking at a phenomenon over long periods (*longue duree*) as well as large spaces (Wallerstein, 2004: 17-19). I argue that an analysis informed by these theories allows an identification of the historical and 'transitive' relationships between Greenland and Denmark; they allow an investigation of how colonialism, as a consequence of capitalist expansion, has led to relations of inequality and dependency. Through this lens, we are able to recognize the ways in which Greenland’s state of affairs is relational to Denmark’s and vice versa, and that this relation can be viewed as one with core-periphery characteristics.

It should be noted that the main objective of my analysis is to narrate those

histories which are generally unknown, unavailable, or ignored. Thus, despite my inspiration from certain theories, my historical analysis does not attempt to squeeze historical processes into a tight framework and it therefore maintains a somewhat descriptive character. This chapter seeks to synthesize a number of academic resources in order to voice the silenced historical realities and legacies. This serves as a starting point for further analysis.

### **Greenland before 1953**

Around 2,500 B.C Inuit tribes from Arctic America first settled in the most northerly part of Greenland, Peary Land. Larger and smaller Inuit groups from Northern Canada continued to settle in Greenland until about 1000 A.D. Greenland's relationship with Northern Europe began in the Viking Age in 989 when Norse peoples from Iceland settled in the Southern parts of Greenland, near present Nuuk and Qaqortoq. The Inuit had not yet settled in these areas. The Norse settlements were independent societies until 1261 when settler communities in Iceland and Greenland agreed to pay taxes to the Norwegian king. Greenland became part of the possessions of the Danish crown in 1380 when Denmark and Norway became a double monarchy, forming one kingdom soon led under the rule of Denmark (Sørensen, 2007: 11; Petersen, 1995: 119). However, as Sørensen writes, "[...]the possession of Greenland added little to the king's power because the Norse population there died out about 1500 following a period of 100 years out of all contact with other parts of the realm" (Sørensen, 2007: 11). The Danish kings did not realize the extinction of the Norse peoples in Greenland until centuries later. Even though Danish kings continued to regard Greenland as one of their inherent dependencies under indisputable Danish sovereignty, contact was not re-established until 1721 when the Norwegian Lutheran missionary, Pastor Hans Egede, arrived in Greenland. He had heard about the Norse people's settlements in Greenland and was concerned that they had turned heathens after the many years in isolation from the outside world. However, he did not find any Norse peoples but instead encountered Inuit peoples. Determined to christianise the Inuit, he settled and established a mission and trading station near present Nuuk (Sørensen, 2007: 11; Nutall, 1992: 17).

In this way, the re-colonization of Greenland began in the 1720s. In many ways, the colonization of Greenland appeared to be rather peaceful. Petersen has argued that this was partly due to the fact that the Inuit communities had no organization above the household level and therefore lacked anyone who might be interested in defending his power (Petersen, 1995: 119). The mission undermined the social position of the *angakut* (shamans) and the weak structure of authority within Greenlandic communities (Petersen, 1995: 119; Nutall, 1992: 17; Sørensen, 2007: 12; Loukacheva, 2007: 18). In 1726, the Danish government assumed responsibility of trade. Trade stations were set up in order to diminish the competition from Dutch whalers and tradesmen in the waters of Greenland. Danish control over the Greenlandic territory was further ensured by the establishment of The Royal Greenland Trading Company (KGH) in 1776, and until the Second World War, Denmark practised state monopoly on trade and investment in Greenland which secured the Danish state the possible colonial profits (Sørensen, 2007: 11; Nutall, 1992: 17; Petersen, 1995: 119). Thus, private capital investments were highly limited. Greenland was physically secluded and any access to Greenland required a special permission by the Danish state. Dahl even argues that the colonial enclosure of Greenland from the world was stronger than in other European colonies (Dahl, 1986: 13). World-systems theory explains that one of the main objectives of colonizing powers was to secure that no other relatively strong state in the world-system would gain access to the resources or the markets of the colony, or at most minimal access (Wallerstein, 2004: 56).

In Loukacheva's words, Danish colonialism was a situation in which “[t]he Inuit were becoming wards of the Norwegian-Danish Crown and were administered by traders and missionaries” (Loukacheva, 2007: 18). Sørensen (2007) has argued that there was a latent antagonism between the two services of trade and mission. The missionaries did not tolerate many Inuit traditional practices, such as shamanism which was considered heathen. Thus, they showed a preference to interfere in the local ways of life. At the same time, the Trading Company encouraged the hunting tradition because its primary profits came from buying whale and seal products (blubber) from local hunters in order to sell it in Europe as ‘petroleum’ to lighten up the streets. As a result, the Danish state pursued a paternalistic colonial policy (Sørensen, 2007: 12), also characterized as a policy of “positive isolation” or “economic paternalism” (Nutall, 1992: 17; Loukacheva,

2007: 21). The paternalistic and protectionist character of Danish colonial rule was justified by a Rousseausque conception of “the Noble Savage” – a conception which held that Native Greenlanders, as “free children of nature”, should remain “uncorrupted” and protected from European civilization (Nutall, 1992: 17; Thomsen, 1996: 268) The Danish Instructions of 1782, ‘the Instrux’, clearly reflects these characteristics of Danish colonial policies. The instructions described the ways in which relations between mission and trade station members were to be regulated, as well as laying out rules for proper behaviour towards the Inuit (Sørensen, 2007: 12; Petersen, 1995: 119; Loukacheva, 2007: 21). The ‘Instrux’ prohibited marriages between Danes and Greenlanders and allowed only the king's officials to have contact with Greenlanders (Loukacheva, 2007: 21). Furthermore, ‘the Instrux’ stated that the Danish staff should “[...] meet the inhabitants with love and meekness, come to their assistance whenever they can, set a good example, and take care that they come to no harm in any way”. Furthermore, “[s]hould anything indecent be committed by the Greenlanders, like either theft or various coarse vices, then the merchant must advise them in a most indulgent way to abstain from it. Should this fail, or should the felony be very coarse indeed, they should be punished according to the circumstances and the character of the crime” (qt. in Sørensen, 2007: 12). It was also the role of the Danish colonizers to offer provisions in times of epidemics and famine (Sørensen, 2007: 12).

As Petersen has commented, the Instrux was pre-occupied with expressing the purpose of economic exploitation, mainly the trade of hunting products (Petersen, 1995: 119). As Dahl and Viemose emphasize, Greenland was colonized as a consequence of the European mercantile expansion of trade with the primary goal of gaining economic profits. Danish colonization was further stimulated by the prospect of finding valuable minerals. The economic motifs behind Danish colonization have often been rejected with excuses of idealistic “good-will” on behalf of the Danes (Dahl, 1986: 13; Viemose, 1997: 7). This view has been supported by the argument that Greenland was a “deficit colony”. Official reports by the Greenland Commission in 1950 state that Danish expenses were higher than the revenues during the colonial period. However, these calculations did not include the tax revenues from a private cryolite mine established in 1850 in Ivittuut, South-West Greenland (Dahl, 1986: 15-16). The mine extracted cryolite for more than a

hundred years (Petersen, 1995: 120), but the tax revenues have generally been underestimated or “forgotten”. Nonetheless, Dahl has shown that if these numbers are included in the calculations, the colonization of Greenland was until 1949 a surplus enterprise (Dahl, 1986: 14-16). Having said this, the colonial profits were in general moderate because of the focus on trade of whale and seal products which were restrained by ecological limits. Furthermore, the specific mode of production of seal hunting limited the ability of capital control; the catch was dependent on the individual hunting method and individual control of the means of production (Dahl, 1986: 16). However, the population was much more affected by Danish colonial policies towards the trade of hunting and fish products than those of the cryolite mine in Ivittuut. As the cod appeared in the 1920s, due to climate changes, with a subsequent rise in demand for fish in the global market, the Danish colonial policy changed to encourage fishing. This resulted in the abandonment of many traditional hunting camps, as Greenlanders were drawn to the inner fjords to find jobs in the fishing industry (Nutall, 1992: 18). In accordance with Wallerstein’s arguments, the Danish colonizers decided on what kinds of production were to be pursued and favoured in the colony, and they legitimized their assumption of authority with self-justifying arguments, as is evident above. In short, this grounded a core-periphery relation in which surplus-value began to flow from Greenland (the periphery) to Denmark (the core) under the control and monopoly of Danish rule (Wallerstein, 2004: 12 & 56).

It should be noted that while the industrial capital expansion superseded the capitalistic mercantile era, Greenland’s international relations were still dominated by mercantile capitalism until the 1950s. Thus, Greenland was not a settler colony. Before 1950, very few Danes had moved to Greenland; in 1938, only 2,2% of the total population were Danish (Dahl, 1986: 16-17). Petersen points out that some groups in Denmark denied that Greenland was a colony because of the administrative bodies that were set up for the internal governance of Greenland. In 1860, local councils, *Forstanderskaberne*, were established to administer social aid and to act as a kind of justice system. *Forstanderskaberne* were replaced by local, elected municipal councils, and two regional “provincial councils” in 1920. The existence of these councils is, however, not sufficient to deny the colonial status of Greenland. Their budget and power

were limited, and as Petersen writes: “Like other councils that were found in several “overseas” colonies, they had certain well-defined tasks but no competence to decide their future” (Petersen, 1995: 120). Nonetheless, the establishment of *Forstanderskaberne* was significant to the national and geographical unity of Greenland. In 1950, the two councils were merged into one National Council (Dahl, 1986: 17). Thomsen emphasizes that in addition to the political institutions, the establishment of cultural institutions had a significant role in the creation of Greenlandic national unity (Thomsen, 1998: 26). It is for example noteworthy that the majority of the population was able to read and write in Greenlandic since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Danish colonizers created the Greenlandic script in the quest to “bring enlightenment” by establishing a school system taught in Greenlandic. Furthermore, two teachers’ colleges were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the newspaper *Atuagagdliutit* was printed in Greenlandic and widely distributed. Thomsen furthermore states that “[t]he “national” identity that now began to replace the bonds of kin and settlement, and to supplement local identity, can thus to a great extent be said to have been created in and by the colonial administration” (Thomsen, 1996: 267). As Dahl argues, the developments towards an actual Greenlandic nation is a contrast to the experience of Inuit peoples in Canada and Alaska (Dahl, 1986: 17).

### **Cloaked Colonialism and New Pressures for Decolonization**

The Second World War drew Greenland into ‘the modern world’. Boel and Thuesen argue that the limited presence of Denmark during the war (due to the German occupation) and the presence of the United States in Greenland (in terms of military and supplies of goods) had significant impact on the emergence of nationalist movements in Greenland (Boel & Thuesen, 1993: 34-35). The historical processes which followed the war lay the ground for growing ethnic consciousness and nationalist movements in Greenland. Two subsequent developments fuelled Greenlandic political mobilization. On one level, Greenland’s dependency on the world market was strengthened with the industrialization of the fishing industry (Thomsen, 1998: 39; Dahl, 1986: 19). On another, a neo-colonial period was launched in which Greenland was more than ever governed politically, economically, intellectually, and physically by Denmark (Petersen, 1995:

121).

As the United Nations pressured for decolonisation of the European colonies in the post-war period, Greenland's colonial status was formally abolished in 1953. Instead, Greenland was annexed as a Danish county. Notably, there was a referendum on the annexation in Denmark, but not in Greenland (Petersen, 1995: 120). It was the goal of Danish policies in Greenland to develop the living conditions of Greenlanders as equal members of the Danish state. Some even began to refer to Greenland as "North Denmark" and Denmark as "South Denmark" (Thomsen, 1998: 40). Despite the Danish discourses of creating "equal footing", the relation between the two countries was unquestionably still characterized by a colonizing power and the colonized. As Sørensen states, "[...]colonization was strongest after Greenland's colonial status was abolished in 1953" (own translation, Sørensen, 2007: 18). Thus, the period up until the establishment of the Home Rule in 1979, Denmark-Greenland relations should be analyzed in a colonial framework. Extensive modernization policies, formulated in Copenhagen, were implemented in Greenland in the 1950s and 1960s. As previously stated, Denmark practised state monopoly on trade and investment in Greenland until the Second World War. The G-50 policies (Greenland Commission's policies from 1950) lifted the monopoly on trade of The Royal Greenland Trading Company (KGH) in order to open the country for private initiatives and capital, but this development strategy failed to attract sufficient private capital. Thus, the strategy was changed with an industrial program in 1959 and the new G-60 policies, and the Danish state began to intervene directly in production. In fact, as Dahl has argued, this entailed that KGH "for the first time in the 250-year long colonial period dominated[...] the whole process from the catch of the products to the moment they were sold in Denmark and other countries. At the start of to the 1970s Greenland had become an export dominated society and the main part of the export production was managed by the state" (own translation, Dahl, 1986: 21). According to Dahl, Greenland changed from being a relatively homogenous society based on hunting and fishing to a society strongly dependent on the world market and the export of fish. Greenland became a periphery society controlled by and dependent on Denmark (Dahl, 1986: 24-25). In other words, the character of the relation between Greenland and Denmark was core-peripheral as explained by Wallerstein; Denmark

practiced extensive control of production and monopoly on Greenlandic products (Wallerstein, 2004: 12 & 93). However, it must be noted that Denmark did not necessarily gain huge economic profits, but arguably enjoyed geo-political benefits, a strengthened position in world politics, as well as the continuing prospects of finding valuable minerals.

The modernization period was marked by policies of “*Danization*”. The industrialization of Greenland entailed forced concentration and resettlement programmes. Many Greenlanders were therefore forced to move to the bigger towns and this had dire consequences for the local hunting cultures. The strategies of economic activities and organization was planned in Copenhagen and introduced by the Danish staff in administration (and education). As Petersen argues, modernization made Greenland economically more dependent on Denmark than ever before. The Danish state paid for it and it was realized by imported Danish manpower (Petersen, 1995: 121). Discriminatory privileges, legalized by a “birth-place-criterion”, were given to Danes: e.g. better housing opportunities and higher wages (Kleivan, 1969: 216-217; Petersen, 1995: 121). The Danish population in Greenland therefore rose from app. 4% in 1950 to app. 20% over the next decade. In this period, they not only occupied the higher positions, they also came as workmen (Thomsen, 1998: 41). The Danish privileges were justified by the argument that the Danes working in Greenland “had come in order to help the Greenlanders” and this idea, arguably, never disappeared (Petersen, 1995: 121). As Thomsen argues, modernization entailed a decrease in cultural distances between Greenlanders and Danes: their living conditions had never been so similar (Thomsen, 1998: 40). The period “may be characterized in cultural terms as a period of overwhelming adoption of Danish cultural items and institutions”, as Kleivan writes (Kleivan, 1969: 109). Yet, the differences had never been so accentuated, and they were further emphasized by the fact that social boundaries followed ethnic boundaries (Thomsen, 1998: 41). The structural change of Greenland and the oppressive nature of integration and modernization (characterized by assimilation policy, birth-place criteria, undermining of the Greenlandic language, the growing Danish physical presence in leading positions etc.) led to a growing Greenlandic consciousness of belonging to a distinct ethnic group (Dahl, 1986: 25).

This was the context for the nationalist movements and an awakened Inuit political awareness of the 1960s and 1970s. The young Greenlandic elite who had been educated in Denmark became radicalised; they spearheaded the anti-colonial, anti-imperialistic mobilization against the Danish administration. This was the first strong wave of Greenlandic nationalism. Particularly, the left-centre party Siumut (“Forward”) played a crucial role in mobilizing the Greenlanders against Danish rule. Siumut and the other Greenlandic political parties (particularly Atassut, centre-right, and Inuit Ataqatigiit, leftist) pressed for Home Rule negotiations, and a Home Rule commission of Greenlandic and Danish politicians was established. After many negotiations (with particular difficulty on the area of mineral resources), a Home Rule law was agreed upon. 73% of the Greenlandic population voted yes to the establishment of Home Rule in 1979. As Dahl has pointed out, the Home Rule inherited the post-colonial economy, a general good standard of living, and a system of social security – but also an “over-developed” administration which was dependent on Danish know-how and incapable of reproducing itself (Dahl, 1986: 107-128). Even though Home Rule made regional self-governance “with national characteristics” (ibid: 128) possible, it did not change the possibility of Danish influence through block grants and foreign policy. Denmark also retained control over defence, mineral resources, and many public institutions (Dahl, 1986: 107-128; Lyng, 2008: 56). Thus, Greenland’s Home Rule has to some extent ensured the continuity of Danish imperial power. However, Dahl also stresses that Home Rule made way for new expressions (in everyday life, attitudes, manifestations, and union work) of pride and self-confidence not seen in Greenland’s earlier history. “When the country’s new flag (side by side with the Danish flag) was raised on the national day of the self-governed Greenland, June 21 1985, the national identity got its symbolic expression” (own translation, Dahl, 1986: 158).

Nutall has argued that the period of fighting for greater autonomy nurtured the feelings of “*kalaaliussuseq*” (identity as Greenlander) (Nutall, 1992: 20). Emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness grew and self-awareness concerning Inuit origin, culture, history, and futures emerged. According to Lyng, the 1970s were characterized by a search for pride, self-consciousness and acceptance as an equal ethnic group (Lyng, 2008: 56). After 1979, a period of “*Greenlandization*” was launched which focused on

expanding the use of the Greenlandic language, extending support to the Greenlandic cultural life, replacing Danish workers with Greenlanders etc. (Dahl, 1986: 129-149). The policy formulations since the establishment of the Home Rule have been, to a great extent, characterized as “*Greenlandizing*”.

My analysis has shed light upon how the historical processes of Danish colonialism, neo-colonialism, and core-peripheral relations are crucial to gain an understanding of present-day relations between Denmark and Greenland. It is not possible to view Greenland’s current state of affairs as the persistence of an “original state”. Greenland’s current dependency on Danish block grants and Danish know-how should be understood in the light of these historical processes. Samir Amin has used the term of “blocked development” about this kind of situation where many years of colonialism and neo-colonialism has caused dependency and underdevelopment. He argues that in these situations fundamental structural changes are needed in order to obtain independence (qt. in Dahl, 1986: 24). In this light, I argue that awareness about the colonial history of Denmark and Greenland is crucial for the redefinition of Greenland-Denmark relations, as well as for the practice of Greenlandic self-governance.

## Perspectives on National Identity in Greenland

### **“Who is the most Greenlandic?”**

The question of “Greenlandicness” has been debated in Greenland throughout the last centuries, and still is. I argue that the concern with national identity in Greenland occurs for various reasons that have to do with the historical and colonial processes by which the Inuit populations of Greenland have been incorporated into the present global grid of sovereign nation-states, the dependency on Danish labour skills and block grants from the Danish state, increased integration in a globalizing world, and the continuous challenges to self-determination. Today, the question of “the definition of a Greenlandic” is often accentuated and debated in Greenlandic newspapers and public forums. Last summer, a group of students from Nuuk, who were involved in a theatre comedy, satirically titled their performance: *Who is the most Greenlandic?* They ‘humourized’ the popular images