

# The Representation of Greenland as a Form of Eskimo Orientalism

## Greenland Images

“What is so special about being a Greenlander is that we all the time have to represent our country. As the Danes only know about the stereotypes which are either “the drunk Greenlander” or “the noble savage”, they will never get to know the core – the real so to say. It is very tiring in the long run” (own translation, Nikolaj Gedionsen, 2008, July 25, p. 31)

This is a statement by a young Greenlander, Nikolaj Gedionsen, who was interviewed for an article in the Greenlandic newspaper, *Sermitsiak*. In the article, he tells about his experiences of moving to Denmark in order to study at university. Gedionsen’s statement exemplifies how certain images and thoughts of Greenlanders prevail in the relation between Greenlanders and Danes, Greenland and Denmark. As Gedionsen suggests, Danish knowledge about Greenland is inhibited by stereotypes. Thomsen has shown that throughout its colonial history Denmark has created images of Greenland images *in* and *for* Denmark in order to maintain control (Thomsen, 1996). In this perspective, the reproduction of “Greenland images” arguably influences Greenland-Denmark relations and therefore requires a critical interrogation. While responses and criticisms to “Greenland images” surface in Greenland, they are largely non-existent in Denmark. A Danish newspaper article, *Grønlands valg for fremtiden* (Greenland’s voting for the future) by Mogens Lykketoft<sup>1</sup> and Julie Rademacher (Social Democratic members of the Danish Parliament and ‘Grønlandsudvalget’), exemplifies the ignorance towards Denmark’s role in the creation of “Greenland images”.

In the article, Lykketoft and Rademacher encourage Greenland to make peace with the past and let the present be the starting point for the future of self-government. They write: “If Greenlandization becomes an idealization of the past and the people who

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<sup>1</sup> Mogens Lykketoft is Foreign Policy Spokesman for the Danish Social Democrats. He was Minister of Finance, 1993-2000, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2000-2001, and Prime Minister candidat in 2005

represent it, then you will exclude a big group of Greenlanders in their own society. The Greenlandizing discourse is creating an image of real Greenlanders as Greenlandic-speaking people of nature with kayaks and kamikker (sealskin boots); and the reality does not look like that” (own translation, Lykketoft & Rademacher, 2008, December 9). In an attempt to provide a “critical” yet hopeful perspective on Greenlandic Self-Government, Lykketoft and Rademacher end up solely blaming the Greenlandizing discourse. The article reflects a general lack of awareness concerning Denmark’s historical engagement in representing Greenlanders in certain ways, in Denmark’s own interest. The authors do not mention how discourses of Greenlanders as “Noble Savages” or “Greenlandic drunks” are produced and perpetuated in Denmark today. They do not mention how the two Greenlandic members of parliament were recently reduced to people who “*all of a sudden have come down here from the ice cap*” by Søren Pind, MP for *Venstre* (the Liberals), when they did not support the Danish government’s proposal of deporting refused asylum seekers residing in Danish asylum centres (own translation, emphasis added, Rehling, 2008, February 15). Furthermore, the article reflects the configurations of power relationships, embedded in the exercise of writing such an article. The authors take out a patent on “Greenlandic reality” and take on the role of “advising” Greenland on how to act on that “reality”, ignoring the perspective from which they write. In fact, the article may reflect Denmark’s political interest in employing a new image of a self-governing Greenland: A Greenland in which the colonial history is forgotten and the Danish presence and language are accepted and embraced.

For these reasons, I hold that an interrogation of the ways in which Greenland is represented in Denmark and the power relationships embedded in “Greenland images” is critical to the employment of self-government. In this chapter, I suggest that Greenland-Denmark relations can be analyzed as a form of Eskimo Orientalism. This is contextualized with an analysis of the creation of “Greenland images”. Thereafter, I will exemplify Eskimo Orientalist discourses in the Danish media and in a new popular Danish publication on Greenland.

### **Eskimo Orientalism in a Theoretical framework**

The process, by which Danish knowledge about Greenland is being reduced to images of

“Noble Savages” or “Greenlandic drunks” can be conceptualized as a form of “Eskimo Orientalism”. This concept stems from the work of Ann Fienup-Riordan who has termed the essentialised images of Alaskan Eskimos in American movies as “Eskimo Orientalism” (Fienup-Riordan, 1995). She thereby applies Edward Said’s post-colonial theory on Orientalism in the context of the Arctic.

In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) describes the ways in which Western scholars, ‘Orientalists’, have created dominating discourses about the Orient. He argues that the West, the Occident, has fabricated recurring images of ‘the Other’ (the Orient). “In addition, the Orient has helped define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said, 1979: 1-2). Orientalism concerns the collective notion of “us” Europeans against “those” non-Europeans by which the idea of European identity and culture as superior has gained in strength. The concepts of the Orient and the Occident are therefore not inert facts of nature, but man-made entities. As Said writes, “as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (Said, 1979: 5). The phenomenon of Orientalism therefore deals with the constellation of ideas about the Orient despite any correspondence – or lack of correspondence – with a “real” Orient. The created Orient is thereby reduced to essentialized images of the Other. As Said explains, Orientalism is not merely a necessity of imagination; the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power and domination. It is not an “airy European fantasy”. The creation of “Otherness” is a will to possess and control. Orientalist discourse is a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient and is tied to enable and ensure the durability of socio-economic and political institutions (Said, 1979: 5-6).

In *Eskimo Essays*, Fienup-Riordan describes how Yu’pik Eskimos in Alaska have been objects of representation. For example, non-Natives have exerted a dominant image of the Eskimo as “naturally peaceful” until corrupted by civilization. She argues that such popular perceptions of “the Eskimo way to life” have had dramatic consequences, not only for the ways in which modern Eskimos depict themselves but also for what non-Natives imagine them to be. She writes that “[o]ur ideas about Eskimos help create the framework they are forced to reside in” (Fienup-Riordan, 1990: 124). She

holds that students of the Arctic have focused on sketching out the “facts” of Eskimo life rather than discussing how these may be best represented. (Fienup-Riordan, 1990: xiv-xv). Fienup-Riordan argues that “[t]he representation of Eskimos concerns the construction of the self from the raw material of the other, the appropriation of ‘natural man’ in the production of American culture” (Fienup-Riordan 1995: xi)<sup>2</sup>.

A number of scholars writing on Greenland have used the concept of Orientalism when describing the representations of Greenland in Danish movies and literature (Thisted, 2002; Bjørst, 2008). In the new book *En Anden Verden: Fordomme og Stereotyper om Grønland og Arktis* (Another World: Prejudices and Stereotypes about Greenland and the Arctic), Bjørst employs the concept of Eskimo Orientalism, focusing on the representation of Greenlanders by people working in the cultural sphere in and outside Greenland (e.g. cultural policies, art, museums, and popular culture). In this book, she demonstrates processes of Othering and Greenlandic internalisation of the imagined and constructed Inuit (Bjørst, 2008). Importantly, she argues that Said’s Orientalism as a theoretical paradigm can be used in the context of the Arctic. The Arctic explorers resemble the Orientalists. However, one should be aware of the specific context that differentiates the Arctic from the Orient: colonialism in the Arctic did not involve large-scale wars and there are no independent nation-states in the Arctic. Nonetheless, like the East, Greenland has experienced the same processes of colonization and the movement towards independence after the Second World War. Throughout this course of history, Orientalism has persisted as a disguised form of colonialism (Bjørst, 2005: 15-16).

In this framework, it is possible to analyze the relation between the Arctic and the West, Greenland and Denmark, as a form of Orientalism. Despite my inspiration from Fienup-Riordan and Bjørst, I will not focus on the internalization of the created “Greenland images” in Greenland, as this has already been discussed in the previous chapter. A crucial aspect of the study of Orientalism deals with the power relations embedded in Orientalist discourses. Thus, the concept of Eskimo Orientalism not only concerns individual identity formation, stereotypes, prejudices, or “the ways in which we

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the term Eskimo is today only used about smaller groups of Native peoples in Alaska and Siberia who still wish to be called eskimos. At the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) in 1977, it was decided that the name ‘Eskimos’ was to be replaced with ‘Inuit’, as ‘eskimo’ was considered a degrading term. ‘Inuit’ is the plural of ‘Inuk’ which means human being (Bjørst, 2008: 120-121)

see each other”. In Said’s words, Orientalism is not merely a necessity of imagination; “Othering” is a will to possess and control. In this sense, Eskimo Orientalist discourses in Denmark are also tied to a political reality. In the context of extending Greenlandic self-determination and establishing a “more equal cooperation between Greenland and Denmark” (own translation, Lykketoft & Rademacher, 2008, December 9), a critical analysis of Orientalism in the relationship between Denmark and Greenland today is therefore crucial. This not only requires an analysis of the historical creation of “Greenland images”, but also the creation of “Greenland images” in Danish media coverage and publications on Greenland today. As Spivak writes: “Post-colonial studies, unwittingly commemorating a lost object, can become an alibi unless it is placed within a general frame. Colonial Discourse studies, when they concentrate only on the representation of the colonized or the matter of the colonies, can sometimes serve the production of current neo-colonial knowledge by placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past, and/or by suggesting a continuous line from that past to our present” (Spivak, 1999: 1)

### **The Creation of Greenland images**

Since the beginning of the colonial period, polar explorers, traders, and colonial administrators have placed Greenlanders in the history of the West. As Bjørst points out, Inuit have for historical reasons not had a chance to write their own history and have thus entered world history through Europeans in, for example, expedition literature and diaries. In this way, the West has for approximately three hundred years spoken *for* the peoples of the Arctic and represented them in certain images. The dominating images of Inuit in the West therefore spring from the West’s historiography of the Arctic. These images are still strong in Western, and above all in Danish, consciousness (Bjørst, 2008: 7-9).

Trondheim has pointed out that since the beginning of the Danish colonization of Greenland, anthropologists have debated Greenlanders’ position in the world. In the beginning, the representation of Greenlanders was not a positive one (Trondheim, 2002: 199). Ole Høiris has shown that descriptions from the eighteenth century (by Hans Egede and C. Bastholm) represented Greenlanders as coldhearted, stupid, unhygienic, and

amoral. They needed discipline, religion, law, and order (qt. in Trondheim, 2002: 207; Thomsen, 1996: 268). However, this image changed somewhat during the nineteenth century – especially with the writings of Knud Rasmussen – to a depiction of Greenlanders as non-violent, free children of nature (Trondheim, 2002: 199). The images of Greenlanders were aligned with Rousseau’s description of people as ‘pure’ in a state of nature, who are subsequently corrupted by civilization (Fienup-Riordan, 1990: 14; Thomsen, 1998: 30). Knud Rasmussen’s writings were based on tenets of evolutionism; Greenlanders, as free children of nature had to ascend to the ladder of culture and become adults. At the same time, Greenlanders were represented as victims who had been corrupted by external influences of ‘civilization’ (Thomsen, 1996: 268).

As I have previously pointed out, the Danish representations of Greenlanders have been used to both legitimize and ensure the colonial interests. The image of the ‘good Greenlander’ as solely the ‘happy hunter’ was used to legitimize protectionist policies and ensure Danish profits from trade with hunting products. In this way, the constructed images have also changed along with the colonial interests. With the increased industrialization of fishing in the beginning of the twentieth century, Danish representations of Greenlanders changed. The ‘good Greenlander’ was not solely depicted as a hunter. Part of the assimilation strategies of the modernization period (beginning in the twentieth century and increasingly taking effect in the 1950s and 1960s) was employing the idea that Greenlanders were to learn from the Danes in order to reach ‘the Danish stage of development’ (Thomsen, 1996: 270; Thomsen, 1998: 37). The creation of ‘Greenland images’ is therefore also tied to enabling and ensuring the durability of socio-economic and political institutions.

Trondheim argues that these discourses have strongly influenced contemporary representations of Greenlanders and Danes (Trondheim, 2002: 199). On the basis of older and more recent texts, she has summarized these representations:

- a) According to Danes, Greenlanders are...
  - uncivilized, primitive, and fortuitous
  - kind, helpful, tolerant but lazy and ineffective
- b) According to Greenlanders, Danes are...

- power-hungry, dominant, supercilious
- efficient, hard-working, competitive
- materialistic, stingy, individualistic

Trondheim's summary does not only sketch out the stereotypical images of 'the Dane' and 'the Greenlander', it also reflects a process of 'Othering'. As Bjørst argues, Denmark has throughout history used Greenland to mirror what Denmark was *not*. Greenland has thereby become a form of 'Otherness' that both attracts and appals Danes (Bjørst, 2008: 9). She argues that the dominating collective discourses on the Arctic in the West can be described as a pendulum. The pendulum swings between a positive narrative of the Arctic as a paradise on earth with artistic, Native, happy inhabitants living in harmony with nature and a negative narrative of the Arctic as a human wilderness where the Indigenous culture is disappearing, burdened by social problems as a consequence of modernization and globalization (Bjørst, 2008: 112). I argue that Bjørst's 'Arctic pendulum' resonates with the contemporary representations of Greenland in Denmark. Thus, there seems to be continuity of the 'Greenland images' of 'free children of nature' or 'victims corrupted by civilization' that dominated the colonial period. This may explain Gedionsen's meeting with the Danish stereotypes of 'the drunk Greenlander' and 'the Noble Savage'.

As I have argued, it is crucial to note the configurations of power in the process of Othering. Embedded in 'Greenland images' is a notion of a parent-child relation. As Boel and Tuesen express it, "Denmark was represented as a mother in relation to Greenland, as a woman who protected her small children against all kinds of dangers[...]" (own translation, Boel & Tuesen, 1993: 38). In this sense, the Danish representations of Greenland that swing from essentialized negative and positive images also position Danes as superior to Greenlanders. This resembles Said's explanation of Orientalism. He writes: "In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said 1979: 7). Today, the parent-child metaphor becomes apparent in the discourse that Denmark is 'helping' Greenland, particularly in relation to the yearly block grants. When Lars Emil Johansen last year suggested that money in Greenland ends up to Danish firms and

Danish workplaces, Jesper Langballe from the Danish People's Party criticized him for "talking badly about the nation which has helped Greenlanders so much" (own translation, qt. in Sermitsiak, 2008, June 13, p. 19). I argue that the idea of the 'Danish favour' is not only restricted to the Danish political right wing, it is an idea that imbues Danish discourses. For example, in an article, *En fri koloni* (A free colony), about Greenlanders' right to self-determination, Emil Rotbøll writes: "Greenland is continuing to be extremely dependent on Denmark, and they should be happy about the Danish aid [block grants]" (own translation, Rotbøll, 2008, November 27). Thus, the image of Denmark as a sort of generous parent that helps Greenland puts the Danes 'in a whole series of possible relationships without ever losing the upper hand'.

### **Representation of Greenland in Danish media: An Overview**

Considering the political and historical step of implementing Greenlandic self-government, one might expect a considerable amount of Danish media coverage. However, the coverage has been surprisingly limited.

I suggest that only certain interest areas in Greenland receive considerable media attention. In my research, I found that the majority of articles about Greenland focus on travel expeditions, the Arctic nature, climate changes, and social problems. In this way, the Danish media coverage to a large extent resembles the 'Arctic pendulum', as is explained by Bjørst (Bjørst, 2008: 112). The Danish media tends to swing between two narratives: a positive narrative about the overwhelming Arctic nature or a negative narrative about the social problems in the everyday life of Greenlanders. I furthermore suggest that both narratives are increasingly influenced by a 'catastrophe syndrom'. This is reflected in the two narratives which have dominated the Danish media coverage of Greenland in 2009: 1) the disappearing beautiful Arctic due to climate changes and 2) poverty and neglect of Greenlandic children.

In August 2008, I researched articles about Greenland in the Danish national newspapers. Here are some typical headlines: "Enormous waves – a dangerous phenomenon in Greenland", "Greenland is marked by climate changes", "The small Ice Age", "Warmer, thank you", "Air planes to Greenland", "Epidemic of suicides in Greenland", "Greenland's youth is the world's fattest", "Greenlanders are accused of



whale fraud”, “Gays are bullied in Greenland”, “Greenland hit by sex scandal”, “The curse”<sup>3</sup>.

The Danish documentary *Flugten fra Grønland* (The Escape from Greenland) from 2007 by Poul-Erik Heilbuth at DR (Denmark’s national radio and TV) exemplifies the essentialized images of Greenland which dominate Danish media. I have extracted a part of the description of the documentary from DR’s website: “Beautiful Greenland is maybe not that beautiful after all. The country is struggling with massive social and human problems that threaten to destroy its society” (own translation, DR1, 2007, October 31). The documentary gained much public attention, and there were both negative and positive responses. Bjørst argues that the response to the documentary shows that a thaw is surfacing in the ways in which Greenlanders are represented. Greenlanders would not accept one-sided and faulty images of Greenland (Bjørst, 2008: 8). As an example, Sörine Gejl from Qassiarsuk in Greenland arranged a demonstration in Copenhagen against the documentary. On a flyer she had written that the documentary was manipulative and did not represent the ‘real Greenland’ (Sermitsiak editors, 2008, March 4). Bjørst points to an increasing tendency of Greenlanders to engage in a dialogue on how Greenland is best represented. She writes that Greenland and Inuit have gained a voice in local and global debates, but she also points to the general lack of knowledge about Greenland outside of Greenland (Bjørst, 2008: 8).

Considering the media coverage of Greenland in Denmark, it seems fair to suggest that the production and reproduction of essentialized “Greenland images” prevail in contemporary Danish representations of Greenland.

### **The “wake-up call” by “Greenland enthusiast”**

While there are currently many responses in Greenland and from Greenlanders to Danish “Greenland images”, critical responses in Denmark are largely non-existent. I hold that Bjørst’s publication of *En Anden Verden: Fordomme og Stereotyper om Grønland og Arktis* (Another World: Prejudices and Stereotypes about Greenland and the Arctic) in 2008 is the only recent Danish publication – available to the Danish public – that

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these are only extractions from a body of articles. However, they may reflect a general tendency.

provides a critical perspective on the representation of Greenland. I will argue that in the same vein as the Danish media, Danish “educational” literature on Greenland resembles the Arctic pendulum. I refer to a recent publication by Marianne Krogh Andersen (2008), *Grønland – almægtig og afmægtig* (Greenland – powerful and powerless), as this book has received much public attention. In this book, Andersen attempts to describe the Home Rule, Nuuk and the settlements, Greenland in relation to Denmark, and Greenlandic possibilities of independence with both ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘criticism’ (Andersen, 2008: 8). In one and the same sentence, Andersen states that she is focusing on the contrasts of natural richness and social problems in an attempt to provide a nuanced depiction of Greenland. I will argue that Andersen’s book is precisely not giving attention to nuances, in its quest to focus on contrast. In effect, the depictions swing from positive narratives about the rich Greenlandic nature and survivalist Greenlanders *and* negative narratives about the social problems in the everyday life of Greenlanders. In this way, the book contributes to the re-affirmation and re-production of essentialized “Greenland images”, as is evident in an appraisal review in the Danish newspaper, Politiken:

The land of Greenlanders, yes. And the paradoxes: two million square kilometres with the number of inhabitants like Randers. Overwhelming beauty and brutal poverty. Joie de vivre and skyrocketing numbers of suicides. Hospitality and national chauvinism. Welfare and dazzling class barriers. Drum dance and hymns. Revivalist meetings and shamanism. Balls and netdating. Sledge dogs and four-wheel drive. Longing for independence and a billion big block grant. Seal blubber and canned ravioli. Solidarity and nepotism. Kindness and affect-violence. Child-care and care failure. Midnight sun and pub’s darkness. Outdoor life and low life expectancy. Social destitution and oil billions hidden under the ocean, the ice, and the granite (own translation, Graugaard, 2008, May 17).

Furthermore, in Andersen’s book, the current relations between Denmark and Greenland are explicitly and uncritically described in terms of the parent-child metaphor – not far from the Arctic Orientalists in the nineteenth century. I have extracted two passages from

the book to exemplify Andersen's Orientalist discourse:

The image of baby Greenland on father Stauning's knee is eloquent. Because Greenland is a weird mixture of spoiled and neglected. Neglected, because the development was so destructively fast that people in Greenland could not follow and because Denmark (because of a gnawing conscience) did not dare to put demands on how the big amount of Danish money should be targeted to development, education and independence (own translation, Andersen, 2008: 29).

In an attempt to provide a 'critical' perspective on Greenland-Denmark relations, Andersen later on writes:

"The conflict between Greenlanders and Danes reminds us of the conflict between teenagers and parents. When will *we* learn not to patronize Greenlanders as children, noble savages, drunks, parasites or just someone who needs help? When do *they* learn not to take everything for granted, that *we* yearly send almost four billion DKR to Greenland? When do *they* acknowledge that the block transfers to Greenland could be used on so many other things, such as hospitals and schools in Denmark? When do we drop our colonial cloaks and begin to talk to each other as grown ups who each can make demands on each other?" (own translation, Andersen, 2008: 30)

Andersen in the same sentence encourages Danes and Greenlanders to "drop the colonial cloaks" while reaffirming "the colonial cloaks" in 'us and them' dualisms, and worse, in a 'teenager vs. adult' metaphor. Despite this problematic discourse, Andersen's book has been received as a "splendid book" which "creates a trustworthy framework for critical analysis of the Home Rule's current situation" (own translation, Graugaard, 2008, May 17). The newspaper Politiken has highly recommended the book to its readers with these final comments: "We are situated in an important period of time in Denmark's and

Greenland's ambivalent coexistence and Marianne Krogh Andersen's portrait of the modern Greenland is a wake-up call. It is an interesting and challenging read about an interesting and challenging country" (own translation, Graugaard, 2008, May 17).

It is highly worrisome that Andersen's discourse on Greenland is received as a trustworthy, educational, and critical "wake-up call", but nonetheless symptomatic of the representation of Greenland in Denmark as a form of Eskimo Orientalism. As Søren Rud writes in a newspaper chronicle, the degrading comments by Danish politicians towards the Greenlandic representatives and the essentialized images of Greenland in the media reflect that "Denmark and Greenland are in a post-colonial situation in which the reckoning with the mental backlog from the colonial period is not finished" (own translation, Rud, 2008, February 21, Politiken). He argues that the decolonization process is not completed with an abolition of the official colonial status. Notably, post-colonial studies and theory have, largely, not been used in Danish academia in relation to Denmark's own colonial history. I argue that interrogation of the ways in which Greenland is represented in Denmark and the power relationships embedded in "Greenland images" is critical to the current political moment of advancing "equality and mutual respect in the partnership between Denmark and Greenland", as is stated in the pre-amble to the bill on Self-Government (own translation, Rasmussen, 2009).